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The Honour of the Clintons

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE HOUSE OF MERRILEES
RICHARD BALDOCK
EXTON MANOR
THE SQUIRE'S DAUGHTER
THE ELDEST SON
THE HONOUR OF THE CLINTONS
THE GREATEST OF THESE
THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH
WATERMEADS
UPSIDONIA
ABINGTON ABBEY
THE GRAFTONS
THE CLINTONS, AND OTHERS
SIR HARRY

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The Honour of the Clintons

By

Archibald Marshall

Author of

"Exton Manor," "The Squire's Daughter,"
"The Eldest Son," etc.



New York
Dodd, Mead and Company
1919

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To

ARTHUR MARWOOD

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BOOK I

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CHAPTER I

A HOME-COMING

THE lilacs in the station-yard at Kencote were heavy with their trusses of white and purple; the rich pastures that stretched away on either side of the line were yellow with buttercups.

Out of the smiling peace of the country-side came puffing the busy little branch-line train. It came to and fro half a dozen times a day, making a rare contact between the outside world and this sunny placid corner of meadow and brook and woodland. Here all life that one could see was so quiet and so contented that the train seemed to lose its character as it crept across the bright levels, and to be less a noisy determined machine of progress than a trail of white steam, floating out over the grazing cattle and the willows by the brook-side, as much in keeping with the scene as the wisps of cloud that made delicate the blue of the fresh spring sky.

The white cloud detached itself from the engine and melted away into the sky, and the train slid with a cheerful rattle alongside the platform and came to a stand-still. Nancy Clinton, who had been awaiting its arrival with some impatience, waved her hand and hurried to the carriage from which she had seen looking out a face exactly like her own. By the time she had

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reached it her twin sister, Joan, had alighted, and was ready with her greeting.

"Hullo, old girl!"

"You're nearly ten minutes late."

The twins had been parted for a fortnight, which had very seldom happened to them before in the whole nineteen years of their existence, and both of them were pleased to be together once more. If they had been rather less pleased they might have said rather more.

More was, in fact, said by the maid who stood at the carriage door with Joan's dressing-bag in her hand.

"Good-afternoon, Miss Nancy. Lor, you *are* looking well, and a sight for sore eyes. We've come back again, you see, and don't want to go away from you no more. Miss Joan, please ketch 'old of this, and I'll get the other things out. Where's that porter? He wants somebody be'ind 'im with a stick."

"Hullo, Hannah!" said Nancy. "As talkative as ever! Come along, Joan. She can look after the things."

The two girls went out through the booking-office, at the door of which the station-master expressed respectful pleasure at the return of the traveller, and got into the carriage waiting for them. There was a luggage cart as well, and the groom in charge of it touched his hat and grinned with pleasure; as did also the young coachman on the box.

"I seem to be more popular than ever," said Joan

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as she got into the carriage. "Why aren't we allowed a footman?"

"You won't find you're at all popular when you get home," said Nancy. "The absence of a footman is intended to mark father's displeasure with you. He sent out to say there wasn't to be one, and William was to drive, instead of old Probyn. Father is very good at making his ritual expressive."

"What's the trouble?" enquired Joan. "My going to Brummels for the week-end?"

"Yes. Without a *with*-your-leave or *by*-your-leave. Such a house as that is no place for a well-brought-up girl, and what on earth Humphrey and Susan were thinking of in taking you there he can't think. I say, why *did* you all go in such a hurry? You didn't say anything about it when you wrote on Friday."

"Because it was arranged all in a hurry. Lady Sedbergh is going through a month's rest cure at Brummels, and she thought she'd have a lively party to say good-bye before she shuts herself up. It was Bobby Trench who made her ask us, at the last moment."

"Joan, is Bobby Trench paying you attentions? You never told me anything in your letters, but he seems to have been always about."

Joan laughed. "I'll tell you all about Bobby Trench later on," she said. "I've been saving it up. Mother isn't annoyed at my going to Brummels, is she?"

"I don't think so. But she said Humphrey and Susan ought not to have taken you there without asking."

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"There wasn't time to ask. Besides, I wanted to go, just to see how the smart set really do behave when they're all at home together."

"Well, how do they?"

"It really *is* what Frank calls '*chaude étoffe*.' I don't wonder that Lady Sedbergh wants a rest cure if that's how she spends her life. On Sunday we had a fancy dress dinner—anything we could find—and she came down as the Brummels ghost in a sort of night-gown with her hair down her back and her face whitened. She looked a positive idiot sitting at the head of the table. She must be at least fifty and the ghost was only seventeen."

"What did you wear?"

"Oh, I borrowed Hannah's cap and apron; and Susan's maid lent me a black dress. I was much admired. Susan was a flapper. She had on some clothes of Betty Trench's, who is only fourteen, and about her size. She looked rather silly. Humphrey was properly dressed, except that he wore white trousers and a pink silk pyjama jacket. He said he was Night and Morning. He looked the most respectable of all the men, except Lord Sedbergh, who said he wasn't playing. He's a dear old thing and lets them all do just what they like, and laughs all the time. Bobby Trench was a bathing woman, with a sponge bag thing on his head. He was really awfully funny, but he was funniest of all when he forgot what he looked like and languished at me. I was having soup, and I choked, and Lord Rokeby, who was sitting next to me, thumped me on the

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back. All their manners are delightfully free and natural."

"Well, you seem to have enjoyed yourself."

"We finished up the evening with a pillow fight. Fancy!—Lady Sedbergh and some of the other older women joined in, and made as much noise as anybody. You should have seen Hannah's face when I did at last get into my room, where she was waiting for me. She said a judgment was sure to fall on us for such goings on."

"A judgment is certainly going to fall on *you*, my dear. Father will seize you the moment you get into the house and ask you what you mean by it."

"Dear father!" said Joan affectionately. "It *is* jolly to be home again, Nancy. How lovely the chestnuts are looking! Dear peaceful old Kencote!"

They drove in through the lodge gates, where Joan received a smile and a curtsey, and along the short drive through the park, and drew up beneath the porch of the big ugly square house. Mrs. Clinton was at the door, and Joan enveloped her in an ardent embrace, which was interrupted by the appearance of the Squire, big and burly, with a grizzled beard and a look of self-contented authority.

"I've got something to say to you, Miss Joan. Come into my room."

He turned his back and marched off to the library, in which he spent most of his time when he was indoors.

Joan, after another hug and kiss, followed him. It may or may not have been a sign of the deterioration

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in manner, wrought by her visit to Brummels, that she winked at Nancy over her shoulder as she did so.

"Aren't you going to kiss me, father?" she asked, going up to him. "I am very pleased to see you again, and I'm sure you're just as pleased to see me."

The face that she lifted up to him could not possibly have been resisted by any man who had not the privilege of close relationship. The Squire, however, successfully resisted it.

"I don't want to kiss you," he said. "I'm very displeased with you. What on earth possessed Humphrey and Susan to take you off to a house like that, without a with-your-leave or a by-your-leave? And what do you mean by going to places where you knew perfectly well you wouldn't be allowed to go?"

"But, father darling," expostulated Joan, with an expression of puzzled innocence, "I knew Lord Sedbergh was an old friend of yours. I didn't think you could *possibly* object to my going there with Humphrey and Susan. They only got up their party on Friday evening, and there wasn't time to write home. Why do you mind so much?"

"You know perfectly well why I mind," returned the Squire irritably. "All sorts of things go on in houses like that, and all sorts of people are welcomed there that I won't have a daughter of mine mixed up with. You've been brought up in a God-fearing house, and you've got to content yourself with the life we live here. I tell you I won't have it."

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"Well, I'm sorry, father dear. I won't do it again. Now give me a kiss."

But the Squire was not yet ready for endearments.

"Won't do it again!" he echoed. "No, you won't do it again. I'll take good care of that. If you can't go on a visit to your relations without getting into mischief you'll stop at home."

"I don't want anything better," replied Joan tactfully. "I didn't know how ripping Kencote was till I drove home just now. Everything is looking lovely. How are the young birds doing?"

"Never mind about the young birds," said the Squire. "We've got to get to the bottom of this business. You must have known very well that I should object to your going to a house like Brummels. When that young Trench came here a few years ago you heard me object very strongly to the way he behaved himself. Cards on Sunday, and using the house like an hotel, never keeping any hours except what suited himself, and I don't know what all. Did they play cards on Sunday at Brummels?"

Joan was obliged to confess that they did.

"Of course! Did *you* play? Did Humphrey and Susan play?"

"Oh no, father; I don't know how to play and I wouldn't think of it," replied Joan hurriedly, to the first question.

"Did you go to church?"

"Oh yes, father. I went with Lord Sedbergh. He is a dear old man, and hates cards now."

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"I don't know why you should call him an old man. He is just the same age as I am. It's quite true that we were friends as young fellows. But that's a good many years ago. He has gone his way and I have gone mine. I don't suppose he is responsible for all the folly and extravagance that goes on in his house; still, he lives an altogether different sort of life, and we haven't met for years. If he remembers my name it's about as much as he would do."

"Oh, but he talked a lot about you, father. He told me all sorts of stories about when you were at Cambridge together. He said once you began to play cards after dinner and didn't leave off until breakfast time the next morning."

"H'm! ha!" said the Squire. "Of course young fellows do a number of foolish things that they don't do afterwards. Did anyone but you and Lord Sedbergh go to church on Sunday?"

Joan was obliged to confess that they had been the only attendants.

"Well, there it is!" said the Squire. "Out of all that household, only two willing to do their duty towards God Almighty! I shall give Humphrey and Susan a piece of my mind. I blame them more for it than I do you. But at the same time you ought not to have gone, and I hope you fully understand that."

"Oh, yes, father dear," replied Joan. "You have made it quite plain now. Don't be cross any more, and give me a kiss. I've been longing for one ever since I came in."

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The Squire capitulated. "Now run away," he said when he had satisfied the calls of filial affection, and paternal no less. "I've got some papers to look through. What you've got to do is to put it all out of your mind, and settle down and make yourself happy at home. God knows I do all *I* can to make my children happy. The amount that goes out in a house like this would frighten a good many people, and I expect *some* return of obedience to my wishes for all the sacrifices I make."

When Joan had left him the Squire went to find his wife.

"Nina," he said, "I'm infernally worried about Joan going to a house like Brummels. The child's a good child, but wants looking after. She ought never to have been allowed to go up to Susan. I thought trouble would come of it when it was suggested."

Mrs. Clinton did not remind her husband that both the twins had stayed with their sister-in-law before, and that beyond a grumble at anybody preferring London to Kencote he had never made any objection.

"I think they ought not to have taken her away on a visit without asking," said Mrs. Clinton. "But Joan and Nancy are grown-up now, and I think they are both too sensible to take any harm by being with Susan. What I feel is that they must see things for themselves, and not be kept always shut up at home."

"Shut up!" repeated the Squire. "That's a foolish way of talking. Home is the best place for young girls; and who could wish for a better home than Ken-

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cote? The fact is that this London life is getting looser and more immoral every day. Look what an effect it is having on Humphrey and Susan! What with all that money that old Aunt Laura left them, and the allowance I make to Humphrey, and the few hundreds a year that Susan has, they could very well afford to keep up quite a nice little place in the country, and live a sensible healthy life. As it is they live in a poky flat that you can hardly turn round in, and yet they spend twice as much money as Dick, who is my eldest son, and is quite content to live here quietly in the Dower House and not go running about all over the place. And they spend twice as much as Walter, who has a family to keep. And they don't really get on well together, either. Their marriage has been a great disappointment—a disappointment in every way. The fact is that a young couple without any children to look after and keep them steady are bound to get into mischief, especially if they've got the tastes that Humphrey and Susan have, and enough money to gratify them. Nina, I *hate* this set of people that they make their friends of. Did you know that that Mrs. Amberley was staying at Brummels?"

"I saw her name in the paper," said Mrs. Clinton.

"A nice sort of woman for a young girl like Joan to be asked to meet! She's a notoriously loose character; and a good many other members of the party are no better than they should be. Lady Sedbergh herself is a frivolous fool, if she's no worse, and as for that young cub who came here a year or two ago, I don't

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know when I've seen a young fellow I object to more. I believe Sedbergh himself has the remains of decency and dignity; but what does one person count amongst all that vicious gang? Upon my word, Humphrey and Susan ought to be whipped for taking a girl of Joan's age to such a place. The children shan't go to stay with them again. The fact is that they can't be trusted in anything. Well, I can't stay talking here; I must go back to my papers."

In the meantime Joan had retired with Nancy to their own quarters. They still occupied one of the large nurseries as their bedroom, and used the old schoolroom as a place where they could enjoy the privacy necessary for their own intimate pursuits. Their elder sister and three of their brothers were married, their governess had left them at the end of the previous year, and as a rule they had these rooms on the second floor of the East wing entirely to themselves. But at this time, Frank, their sailor brother, was at home on leave, and had taken up his old quarters there. He was a rising young lieutenant of twenty-six, and the twins had been presented to their sovereign and let loose generally on a grown-up world. But between them they managed to produce a creditable revival of the period when the East wing had been full of the noise and games of childhood; for they were all three young at heart and the cares of life as yet sat lightly on them.

"Frank and I have started schoolroom tea again," said Nancy, as she and Joan went up to their bedroom

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together. "He says he wants eggs, after being out the whole afternoon; and mother doesn't mind. You will preside over the urn at five o'clock."

"Jolly!" said Joan. "Where is Frank?"

"He hacked over to Mountfield to see Jim and Cicely." (Cicely, the eldest of the Clinton girls, had married a country neighbour, Jim Graham, and lived about five miles from Kencote.) "But he said he would be back for tea. I suppose you calmed father down all right?"

"Oh yes. He's a dear old lamb, but he must have his say out. You only have to give him his head, and he works it all off. You know, Nancy, although father is rather tiresome at times, he is much better than all those silly old men you meet about London. He is over sixty, and he doesn't mind behaving like it. A lot of *them* expect you to treat them as if they were your own age, whether they are married or not."

"You seem to have gone through some eye-opening experiences."

"I have. I feel that I know the world now."

She had taken off her hat, and stood in front of the glass, touching the twined masses of her pretty fair hair. The lines of her slim body, and her delicate tapering fingers, were those of a woman; but the child's soul had not yet faded out of her eyes, and still set its impress on the curves of her mouth.

"Tell me about Bobby Trench."

Joan laughed, with a ringing note of amusement. "Of course you know *why* we were all given such a sud-

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den and pressing invitation to Brummels," she said.

Nancy jumped the implied question and answer. "Well, it was bound to come sooner or later," she said. "With *both* of us, I mean; not you only. There is no doubt we possess great personal attractions. But I don't think you have much to boast about, if it's only Bobby Trench. What is he like? Has he changed at all since he came here?"

"Oh, he is just as silly and conceited as ever; but love has softened him."

"I shouldn't want him softened, myself. He'd be sillier than ever. Tell me all about it, Joan. How did he behave?"

Joan told her all about it; and the recital would not have pleased Mr. Robert Trench, if he had heard it. With those cool young eyes she had remorselessly regarded the antics of the attracted male, and found them only absurd. But she had not put a stop to them.

"You know, Nancy," she said guilelessly, "it's all very well to talk as they do in books about a man being able to make a girl like him if he keeps at her long enough; but I am quite sure Bobby Trench could never make me like him—in that way—if he tried for a hundred years. Still, it *is* rather nice to feel that one is grown up at last."

"The fact of the matter is, you have been flirting with Bobby Trench," said Nancy; "and you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

But Joan indignantly denied this. "What I did," she said, "was to prevent his flirting with me."

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There was a moment's pause. Then Nancy said unconcernedly, "I suppose I told you that John Spence came here."

Joan turned round sharply, and looked at her. "No, you didn't," she said.

After another moment's pause, she said, "You know you didn't."

Then came the question: "Why didn't you?"

"He was only here for two nights," said Nancy. "At the Dower House, of course. If I didn't tell you, I meant to."

Joan scrutinised her closely, and then turned away.

"He was awfully sorry to miss you," Nancy said. "He told me to give you his love."

"Thank you," said Joan, rather stiffly.

John Spence was a friend of Dick Clinton, who had managed his estates for him for a year. He had first come to Kencote when the twins were about fifteen, and had impressed himself on their youthful imaginations. He was nearly twenty years older than they, but simple of mind, free of his laughter, and noticeably warm-hearted. He liked all young things; and the Clinton twins had afforded him great amusement. He had been to Kencote occasionally as they were growing up, and the elder-brotherly intimacy with which he had treated them at the first had not altered. He was the friend of both of them, but when he had come twice to Kencote to shoot, during the previous season, he had seemed to show a very slight preference for the society of Joan. It had been so slight that the twins, who had never had

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thoughts which they had not shared, had made no mention of it between them.

But now, at a stroke, the great fact of sex came rushing in to affect these young girls, who had played with it in a light unknowing way, but had never felt it. They could amuse themselves, and each other, with the amorous advances of Bobby Trench, but the fact that Nancy had omitted to tell Joan of John Spence's visit was portentous, slight as the omission might seem. Their habitual intercourse was one of intimate humour, varied by frank disputes, which never touched the close ties that bound them. But this was a subject on which they could neither joke nor quarrel. It was likely to alter the relations that had always existed between them, if it was not faced at once.

It was impossible for either of them not to face it. For the whole of their lives each had known exactly what was in the mind of the other. Each knew now, and the knowledge could not be ignored.

"Well, he was awfully nice," said Nancy, rather as if she were saying something she did not want to. "I liked him better than ever. But he sent his love to you."

"I don't see why you shouldn't have told me that he had come," said Joan.

But she saw very well, and in the light of her seeing John Spence ceased to be the openly admired friend of her and Nancy's childhood, and became something quite different.

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CHAPTER II

A VULGAR THEFT

In the great square dining-room at Kencote the Squire was sitting over his wine, with his eldest and youngest sons.

From the walls looked down portraits of Clintons dead and gone, and of the horses and dogs that they had loved, as well as some pictures that by-gone owners of Kencote had brought back from their travels, or bought from contemporary rising and since famous artists. There were some good pictures at Kencote, but nobody ever took much notice of them, except a visitor now and then.

Yet their presence had its effect on these latest members of a healthy, ancient line. No family portraits went back further than two hundred years, because Elizabethan Kencote, with nearly all its treasures of art and antiquity, had been burnt down, and Georgian Kencote built in its place. Even Georgian Kencote had suffered at the beginning of the nineteenth century, at the hands of a rich and progressive owner; rooms had been stripped of panelling, windows had been enlarged; and, but for a few old pieces here and there, the furniture was massive but ugly. The Clintons were as old as any commoner's family in England, and had lived at Kencote without any intermission for some-

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thing like six hundred years; but there was little to show it in their surroundings as they were at present. Only the portraits of the last six or seven generations spoke mutely but insistently of the past, and their prototypes were as well-known by name and character to their descendants as if they had been known in the flesh.

To us, observing Edward Clinton, twentieth century Squire of Kencote, with the eldest son who would some day succeed him, and the youngest son, who had taken to one of those professions to which the younger sons of a line undistinguished for all except wealth and lineage had taken as a matter of course throughout long generations, this background of family portraits is full of suggestion. One might ask how much of the continuity of life and habit it represents is stable, how much of it dependent upon fast-changing circumstance. How far is this robust elderly man, living on his lands and desiring to live nowhere else, and the handsome younger man, whose life has been spent in the centre of all modern happenings,—how far are they what they appear to be, representative of the well-to-do classes of modern England; how far is their attitude to the life about them affected by ideas inherent in their long descent? Are they really of the twentieth century, or in spite of superficial modernity, of a time already passed away?

One might say that the life lived by the Squire was the same life, in all but accidentals, as that of the squires who had gone before him, and whose portraits

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hung on the walls, and that it would be lived in much the same way by the son who was to come after him. And so it was. But the lives of those dead squires had been part of the natural order of things of their time. Their lands had provided for it, and of themselves would provide for it no longer. It was only by the accident of our Squire being a rich man, and being able to leave his son a rich man, that either of them could go on living it. To this extent his life was not based upon his descent, and was indeed as much cut off from that of the previous owners of Kencote as if he had been a man of no ancestry at all, whose wealth, gained elsewhere, enabled him to enjoy an exotic existence as a country gentleman. If wealth disappeared the long chain would be broken, for a reason that would not have broken it before.

But, when that is said, there still remains the whole ponderous weight of tradition, which makes of him something different from the rich outsider who, with no more than a generation or two behind him, or perhaps none at all, comes in to take the place of the dispossessed owner whose land alone will no longer support his state. What that counts for in inherited benevolence and sense of responsibility, qualified by strange spots of blindness where the awakened conscience of a community is beginning to see more clearly, it would be difficult to gauge. What one may say is that *some* flower whose perfume one can distinguish should be produced of a plant so many centuries rooted; that twenty generations of men preserved from the struggle

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for existence, and having power over their fellows, should end in something easily distinguishable from a man of yesterday; that such old established gentility should have some feelings not shared by the common mass, some peculiar sense of honour, some quality not dependent upon wealth alone, some clear principle emerging from the mists of prejudice and the mere dislike of all change.

So we come back to the Squire sitting with his sons over their wine, their pictured forebears looking down on them from the walls, and wonder a little whether there is anything in it all, or whether we are merely in the company of a man to whom chance has given the opportunity of ordering his life on obviously opulent lines, like many another with no forebears that he knows anything of.

Dick Clinton had held a commission in His Majesty's Brigade of Guards up to the time of his marriage four years before, and had been very much in the swim of everything that was going on in the world of rank and fashion. Now he lived for the most part quietly at the Dower House, which lay just across the park of Kencote, and busied himself with country pursuits and the management of the estate to which he would one day succeed. He was beginning ever so little to put on flesh, to look more like his father, to lose his interest in the world outside the manor of Kencote and the adjacent lands that went with it. But he was not yet a stay-at-home, as the Squire had long since become, and he and his wife had just returned from a fortnight

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in London, well primed with the interests of their former associates.

"Have you heard about this business at Brummels?" he said, as he passed the decanter.

The Squire frowned at the mention of Brummels. "No. What business?" he asked.

"Lady Sedbergh has had a pearl necklace stolen. It's said to be worth ten thousand pounds; say five. She says that she kept it in a secret hiding-place, and the only person who could have known where it was is Rachel Amberley. She accuses her of stealing it. There's going to be a pretty scandal."

The Squire frowned more ferociously than ever. "That's the sort of thing that goes on amongst people like that!" he said with disgust. "They have no more sense of honour than a set of convicts. A vulgar theft! And there's hardly one of the whole lot that wouldn't be capable of it."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Dick; "but if Mary Sedbergh can be believed, there's not much doubt that Mrs. Amberley walked off with it. It seems that there's an old hiding-place in the morning-room at Brummels. You press a spring in the wainscot, and find a cupboard."

"There are plenty of those about," said the Squire. "Anybody might find it. Still, I've no doubt that she's right, and it was that Mrs. Amberley who actually did steal it."

Frank laughed suddenly. He was accustomed to suck amusement out of the most unlikely sources, and

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his father, whether unlikely or not, was one of them. "Why does she think Mrs. Amberley found it?" he asked.

"Because she showed her the hiding-place in a moment of expansion. It isn't just a cupboard behind the panelling. When you've found that you have only begun. There is another secret place behind the cupboard itself. Only Sedbergh and his wife knew of it. It's a secret that has been handed down; and well kept."

"Then why on earth did she tell a woman like Mrs. Amberley about it?" enquired the Squire.

"I don't know; though it's just like her to do it. I think Mrs. Amberley was at school with her, or something of that sort. She had a big party at Brummels, and then emptied the house and went through a month's rest cure there. At the end of the month she looked for her necklace, and found it gone. A diamond star had gone as well; but other things she had put away had been left."

"So, whoever the thief was, she had a month's start," said Frank.

"Yes. Sedbergh was called in, and they both went straight to Rachel Amberley and offered to hush it all up if she would give back the necklace."

The Squire snorted.

"Rachel Amberley bluffed it out. She said she would have them up for scandal if they breathed a word of suspicion anywhere. They have been breathing a good many. In fact, it's all over the place. And

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nothing has happened yet. Everybody is wondering who will make the first move."

"*She* won't," said the Squire, who had never met Mrs. Amberley. "I am not in the way of hearing much that goes on amongst people of that sort, now, but she's a notoriously loose woman. That's why I was so annoyed when I heard that Joan had been taken to a house where she was staying. By the by, this affair didn't take place at that particular time, did it?"

"Yes. That's when it happened."

The Squire's face was blacker than ever. "Then it will be known who was of the party," he said. "Our name will be dragged into one of these disgraceful scandals, and every Dick, Tom, and Harry in the country will be talking about us. Upon my word, it's maddening. I suppose I can't prevent Humphrey and Susan keeping what company they please, but it makes me furious every time I think of it—their taking Joan there."

"I don't suppose Joan's name will come out," said Dick. "There were lots of people in the house at the time, and they are not likely to mention all of them."

The Squire was forced to be content with this. "Well, don't say anything about it to her," he said. "It's an unsavoury business, and the less she knows about that sort of thing the better."

"You can't keep her shut up for ever," said Dick; but his father pressed more insistently for silence. "I

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don't want it mentioned," he said irritably. "Please don't say anything to her—or you either, Frank."

Frank was mindful of this injunction when he next found himself alone with his sisters, which was at tea-time the next day. But he saw no harm in mentioning the name of Mrs. Amberley. What had Joan thought of her during that visit to Brummels, made memorable by the disturbance that had affected her home-coming?

"Oh, I'm sick of Brummels," she said. "Anyone would think it was—well, I won't sully my lips by repeating the name of the place. Anyhow, it was a good deal more amusing than Kencote."

"Kencote is the jolliest place in the world," said Frank. "You and Nancy are always running it down."

"It may be the jolliest place in the world to you," said Nancy, "because you are here so seldom, and you do exactly what you want to do when you *are* here. It is pretty slow for Joan and me, boxed up here all the year round."

"Well, never mind about that," said Frank, "I want to know how the notorious Mrs. Amberley struck you, Joan."

"Is she notorious?" asked Joan. "She struck me as being old, if you want to know. Much older than mother, although I suppose they are about the same age, and mother's hair is white, and hers is vermilion."

"Did you talk to her at all?"

"Not much. She isn't the sort of person who would care about girls. And I don't suppose they would care much about her, unless they were pretty

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advanced. I'm not, you know, Frank. I'm a bread and butter Miss from the country. I keep my mouth shut and my eyes open."

"At the same time," said Nancy, "our splendid youth is really a great attraction. If Joan and I had lived in the eighteenth century, we should have been known as the beautiful Miss Clintons. And we should have had a very good time."

"You have a very good time as it is," said Frank, "only you're not sensible enough to know it. You ought not to want anything much jollier than this."

The windows of the big airy upstairs room were wide open to the summer breezes. Outside, the spreading lawns of the garden, bordered by ancient trees, and the grassy level of the park lay quiet and spacious, flooded with soft sunshine. There was an air of leisure and undisturbed seclusion about the scene, which was summed up in this room, retired from the rest of the house, where the happiness of childhood still lingered. It was not surprising that Frank, coming back to it after his long sea wanderings, should have been seized by the opulent tranquillity of his home. He was as happy as he could be, all day and every day, woke up to a clear sensation of pleasure at finding himself where he was, and watched the dwindling tail of his leave with hardly less regret than the end of the holidays had brought him during his schooldays. At twenty-six, with ten years of the sea and the responsibilities of his profession behind him, he had stepped straight back into his boyhood. He was not reflective

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enough to realise that time would not stand still for him in this way for ever. It seemed to him that, whatever else might change, Kencote would always be the same, and he could always recapture his boyhood there. That was partly why he disliked to hear his young sisters belittling its comparative stagnation, which was to him so delightful. He had thought them absurdly grown-up when he had first come home; but that effect had worn off. He was a boy, and they were children in the schoolroom again, their father and mother downstairs, out of the way of their noise. So it would be when he came home again in two or three years' time. So it would always be, as far as it was in him to look ahead.

But his sisters had other ideas. Their wing-feathers were growing, and they were already beginning to flutter them. Perhaps in after years, whatever happiness might come to them—and all life in the future was, of course, to be happy, as well as much more exciting—they too would look back upon these midsummer months with regret, and wish for their childhood back again.

A few days later Joan and Nancy were taking a country walk with their dogs. They were about a mile away from Kencote, when a motor-car came suddenly along the road towards them, driven by a smart-looking young man in a green hat and a blue flannel suit. The girls were on the grass by the side of the road holding two of the dogs until it should have passed, when to their surprise it stopped, and a cheerful voice called out,

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"Hullo, Miss Joan! Here's a piece of luck! I was just on my way to see you."

Joan stood upright with a blush on her face, which she would have preferred not to have shown, while Mr. Robert Trench jumped down from the car and advanced to shake hands with her. He also shook hands with Nancy, remarking that he remembered her very well, and should have known her anywhere by her likeness to her sister.

"What remarkable powers of observation you have!" observed Joan, rallying her forces.

Bobby Trench only grinned at her. "Chaffing, as usual!" he said. "But, bless you, I don't mind. I say, I suppose you have heard about this beastly thing that has happened at Brummels—about my mother's necklace?"

"No, I haven't," said Joan.

"What, not heard that it was stolen! Why, it was when you were staying in the house too. Everybody is talking about it. Wherever have you been burying yourself that you've heard nothing?"

"At home at Kencote," replied Joan. "You don't think I brought the necklace away with me, do you?"

Bobby Trench grinned again. "We were talking it over last night," he said. "I think we have seen everybody that was in the house at the time except you, and I said, 'By Jove! I wonder whether Miss Joan noticed anything?' We don't want to leave any stone unturned, so I said I would run down and look you all up.

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It must be years since I came to Kencote. You were both jolly little kids then."

"I beg your pardon," said Nancy, "we were fifteen. We weren't kids at all."

"I apologise," said Bobby. "Anyhow, I thought it was a chance not to be missed. Now, *did* you notice anything, Miss Joan? Oh, I forgot; I haven't told you the story yet."

"I think you had better do that first," said Joan.

Bobby Trench then told them the story, and when he came to describe the hiding-place Joan gave an exclamation.

"Is it just where that little Dutch picture hangs?" she asked. "The one with the old woman cleaning a copper pot?"

"Yes. That's the place," said Bobby. "Why? Do you know anything about it?"

Joan's face was serious. "Are you quite sure that Mrs. Amberley took the necklace?" she asked.

"We're about as sure as we could be, unless we had actually seen her doing it. I'll tell you what we have found out afterwards. You didn't see her opening the cupboard by any chance, did you?"

Joan did not reply for a moment. Nancy looked at her with some excitement on her face. "What *did* you see?" she asked.

Still Joan seemed unwilling to speak, and Bobby Trench said, "If you did see something, you ought to let us know. It's a very serious business. The things stolen are worth pots of money, and we know perfectly

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well that it can only be Mrs. Amberley who has taken them. Besides, we've pretty well proved it now. We have found people to whom she sold separate pearls; but for goodness' sake don't let that out yet. I only tell you so that you may know that it wouldn't only rest on you."

Joan raised her eyes to his. "I went into the morning-room," she said, "and Mrs. Amberley was standing with her back to me by the fireplace."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Bobby Trench, staring at her as if fascinated.

"She turned sharp round when I came in," said Joan, "and then she asked me if I didn't love old Dutch pictures, and showed me that one. That is why I remembered about it."

"Was she actually looking at it when you came in?"

"Well, no. I don't think she was. It was just a little to the right of where she was standing. I had forgotten all about it, but I remember now that when she mentioned the picture I thought to myself that she seemed to have been looking at the bare panels, and not at the picture at all. Besides, she was blushing scarlet, and it was just as if I had caught her in something."

"By Jove! you must jolly nearly have caught her with the panel open. Did you notice anything odd about the wall she was standing in front of as you came in?"

Joan thought for a moment. "No, I didn't," she said decidedly.

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"Had she got anything in her hand?"

Joan thought again. "I didn't notice," she said. "But I believe she kept her hands behind her while she was talking to me. She didn't talk long. Just as I was looking at the picture she suddenly said she had some letters to write, and went out of the room."

Bobby Trench, with growing excitement, asked her further questions—as to the time at which this had happened, as to the exact words that Mrs. Amberley had said.

"We've hit the bull's eye this time," he said. "What a brilliant idea it was of mine to come and ask you! Look here, hadn't we better go and talk to Mr. Clinton about it? He's an old friend of my father's. I expect he'll be pleased to be able to give us a hand up over this business."

"I should think he would be delighted," said Nancy drily. "Will Joan have to give evidence at a trial?"

"Oh yes. There'll be a trial all right. We've got the good lady sitting, now. But you won't mind that, will you, Miss Joan? If you'll both hop in, I'll drive you back. We can take the dogs, too, if you like. I hope Mr. Clinton will be in. I shall be glad to see him again."

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CHAPTER III

THE SQUIRE IS DRAWN IN

If Bobby Trench really felt the pleasure he had expressed at the prospect of seeing Mr. Clinton again, it was a sensation not shared by the Squire, when his motor-car came swishing up the drive, and he alighted from it in company with Joan and Nancy.

Some few years before, Humphrey Clinton had brought him to Kencote for some winter balls. Lady Susan Clinton, a distant connection, now Humphrey's wife, and her mother, had been members of the house-party, and trouble had ensued. They belonged to the fast modern world, which the Squire abominated. They had essayed to play Bridge on Sunday; Bobby Trench had tried to get out of going to church, had made havoc of punctuality, had, in fact, seriously disturbed the serene, self-satisfied atmosphere of Kencote. And the Squire had never forgiven him. He was a "young cub," the sort of youth he never wished to see at Kencote again, outside the pale of that God-fearing, self-respecting country aristocracy which was to the Squire the head and front of all that was most admirable and best worth preserving in the body politic.

Bobby Trench had been hardly less free of criticism on his own account. Kencote was a cemetery of the dead, a little bit of Hampstead stuck down ten miles

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from nowhere, which came to the same thing; its owner was an old clodhopper. Never again would he permit himself to be inveigled into paying such a visit.

Yet here he was, advancing across the turf to where the tea-table was spread in the shade of a great cedar, with an ingratiating smile on his face, and apparently no doubt of the prospective warmth of his welcome.

"How do you do, Mrs. Clinton? Years since I saw you. How do you do, Mr. Clinton? You don't look a day older. The governor sent you messages, in case I should be lucky enough to see you. We are all at Brummels for the week-end. I started at ten this morning; made about a hundred miles of it; lunched at Bathgate. By Jove, you live in a past century here! Wonderful peaceful country, but a bit dull, eh?"

The Squire had somewhat recovered from his surprise during this speech, and was prepared to abide by his principles of hospitality, in spite of his distaste for Bobby Trench, and all he represented. But the last comment aroused his resentment, and emphasised the distance that lay between him and this glib young man.

"We don't find it dull," he said; "but I dare say people who spend their lives rushing about from one place to another and never settling to anything might. They are welcome to their tastes, but the less I have to do with them the better I'm pleased."

Bobby Trench laughed good-humouredly. "Well, it's true we *are* rather a rackety lot nowadays," he said. "I don't know that you haven't got the best of it, after all. I sometimes think I shouldn't mind settling down

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in the country myself, and doing a bit of gardening. We've started gardening at Brummels. We quarrel like anything about it; it's the greatest sport. You don't go in for it here, I see. But it's a jolly place. You've got lots of opportunities."

The Squire found himself fast losing patience. It was true that he did not go in for gardening, in the modern way, judging that pursuit to be more fitted for the women of the family. Mrs. Clinton had her Spring garden, in which she was allowed to have her own way, within limits, in the matter of designing patterns of bright-coloured flowers; and she was also allowed a say in the arrangement of the summer bedding, as long as she did not interfere too much with the ideas of the head gardener. But as for altering anything on a large scale, or even additional planting of anything more permanent than spring or summer flowers, that was not to be heard of.

And yet the Squire did love his garden, as he loved everything else about his home. He knew every tree and every shrub in it, and was immensely proud of the few rarities which every old garden that has at some time or other been in possession of an owner who has taken a living interest in it possesses. He knew nothing of the modern nurseryman's catalogue, but would gratefully accept a cutting or a root of something he admired from somebody else's garden, and see that it was brought on well and planted in the right place. He belonged to the days of Will Wimble, who was pleased " to carry a tulip-root in his pocket from one to

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another, or exchange a puppy between a couple of friends that lived perhaps on the opposite sides of the county"; and who shall say that that intimate sort of knowledge of an old-established garden gives less pleasure than the constant changes which modern gardening involves? If his great grandfather, who had called in an eighteenth century innovator to sweep away the old formal gardens of the Elizabethan Kencote, and lay the ground they covered all out afresh, had stayed his hand in the same way, he would have done a good deal better.

The Squire swallowed a cup of tea and rose from his seat. "Well, I have a great deal of work to get through," he said, "so I'll ask you to excuse me. Remember me to your father. It's years since we met, but we were a good deal together as young fellows."

He held out his hand. It was as near a dismissal as he could bring himself to utter under the circumstances. He would have liked to be in a position to tell Bobby Trench that he did not want him at Kencote, and the sooner he went the better; but he could not very well put his meaning into words.

"Oh, but wait a minute," said the totally unabashed Bobby. "I've come over on important business, Mr. Clinton. I particularly want to have a word with you."

"Well, then, come into my room when you have had your tea," said the Squire. "One of the girls will show you the way."

"Well, it's about Miss Joan I wanted to talk to you," persisted Bobby. "Of course, you've heard of

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that unfortunate business at Brummels when she was there a few weeks ago—my mother's necklace being stolen, I mean."

The Squire's face showed rising temper. "I did hear of it," he said. "Dick told me, and I asked him particularly not to say anything about it to Joan. I don't want my girls to be mixed up in that sort of thing. Have you told her about it?"

Bobby Trench, marking the air of annoyance, chose to meet it with diplomatic lightness. "Well, none of us want to be mixed up with that sort of thing," he said with a smile. "But I'm afraid we can't help ourselves in this instance. Yes, I told Miss Joan. Of course I thought she knew."

The Squire sat down again, the frown on his brow heavier than ever. "I must say it's very annoying," he said. "To be perfectly frank with you, I was annoyed at my daughter being taken to Brummels at all. Your father is an old friend of mine, and I should say the same to him. I don't like the sort of thing that goes on in houses like yours, and I don't want my children to know the sort of people that go to them. I may be old-fashioned; I dare say I am; but to my mind a woman like that Mrs. Amberley is no fit person for a young girl to come into contact with, and——"

"Well, you're about right there," broke in Bobby Trench, who may have been surprised at this exordium, but was unwilling to have to meet it directly. "She's no fit person for anybody to come in contact with, as it turns out. Still, she's all right in a way, you know.

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She and my mother were friends as girls, and, of course, her people are all right. We couldn't tell that——"

"I don't care who her people were," interrupted the Squire in his turn. "She might be a royal princess for all I care; I say she would still be a disreputable woman. What's happened since only shows that she will stick at nothing. I should have objected just as much to a daughter of mine being asked to meet her if this vulgar theft hadn't happened. In fact, I did object. And a good many other people that haven't got themselves into trouble by stealing necklaces are no better than she is. It's the whole state of society, or what is called such nowadays, that I object to. I won't have my girls mixing with it. There are plenty of good people left who wouldn't have such women as Mrs. Amberley inside their houses, and they can find their friends amongst them. I'm annoyed that you should have said anything to Joan about what has happened, and I don't want the subject mentioned again."

"Well, I'm sorry, Mr. Clinton," said Bobby. "But we were bound to leave no stone unturned to get at the truth of things; and as it turns out Miss Joan will be a very valuable witness on our side. She saw Mrs. Amberley at the hiding-place, and can only just have escaped seeing her take out what was in it. She——"

"What's this?" exclaimed the Squire terrifically.

Joan met his gaze unflinchingly. The state of her conscience being serene, she was in truth rather enjoying herself, and her father's asperities had long ceased to terrify either her or Nancy. "I told Mr. Trench what

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I saw," she said. "Of course I hadn't thought about it before, because I knew nothing of what had happened."

"What did you see?" enquired the Squire.

She told him. He received the information with a snort. "You saw a lady looking at a picture," he said. "What is there in that? I've no doubt that Mrs. Amberley did take the necklace, but if she is going to be charged with it there's not the slightest necessity for your name to be brought in at all. What you saw amounted to nothing."

"Oh, but I think it did," said Bobby Trench. "It was what she looked like when Miss Joan caught her. You said yourself that she looked as if she had been doing something she oughtn't to have done, and was startled at your coming in, didn't you, Miss Joan?"

"Yes," said Joan. "It was just like that. And she blushed scarlet, and then ran away suddenly."

"The fact is," said her father, "that you have imagined all this, because of what you were told. You think you will gain importance by telling a story of that sort; but I tell you I won't have it."

"Oh, father dear," expostulated Joan, "I wouldn't tell stories, you know. I haven't imagined anything. It was all just as I have said."

"Well, then, you had better forget it as soon as you can," said the Squire, changing his ground. "It's a most unpleasant subject, and I won't have you talking about it, do you hear?—either you or Nancy. Now mind what I say."

He rose from his seat again, as if the subject was

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finally disposed of. And again Bobby Trench arrested his departure. "I'm afraid we can't leave it like that, you know, Mr. Clinton," he said. "Miss Joan's evidence is of the greatest possible importance to us. I'm bound to tell my people. Besides, surely you wouldn't want to keep a fact like that back, would you? The necklace is worth six or seven thousand pounds, and if we bring the theft home to Mrs. Amberley, my mother may get some of the pearls back. We've already traced some of them, and know that she has been disposing of them separately."

"Tell your people by all means," said the Squire. "But don't let Joan's name be brought into the trial. I insist upon that. I won't have it."

Bobby Trench stared at this exhibition of blindness to the necessities of the case. He made no reply, probably reflecting that the subpœna which would be served upon Joan would bring those necessities home to the Squire as readily as anything, and that it would be unnecessary to bring additional wrath upon himself by explaining matters beforehand.

It was Mrs. Clinton who, observing his face, said, "I think Mr. Trench means that it will be necessary for Joan to give evidence of what she saw at the trial, if it comes to that," she said.

"What!" exclaimed the Squire, bending his brows upon her. "What can you be thinking of to suggest such a thing, Nina? A girl of Joan's age to give evidence at a criminal trial! A pretty idea, indeed!"

He transferred his glare upon Bobby, who felt un-

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comfortable. "Absurd old creature!" was his inward comment, but as he made it he looked at Joan, standing in her white frock under the shade of her big hat, and the picture she made appealed so forcibly to his æsthetic sense that he was impelled to an endeavour to put the situation on a better footing. It would never do to go away saying nothing, and then to launch the bombshell of a subpœna into peaceful, prejudiced Kencote. It would bring Joan into the witness-box, but it would certainly keep Bobby Trench away from her, in the worst possible odour with her resentful parent.

"I know it's a most awful bore, Mr. Clinton," he said. "I'll promise you this, that if Miss Joan can be kept out of it in any way, she shall be. I should hate to see her in the court myself."

"You won't see her there," said the Squire decisively. "But you'll excuse my saying that it won't matter to you one way or the other where you see her. I will write to your father about this business. It's all most infernally annoying, and I wish to goodness you had kept away from us—although I should have been glad enough to see you here if this hadn't happened."

The last statement was not in the least true, but was drawn from him by the contest going on in his mind between his strong dislike of Bobby Trench and his sense of what was required of him towards a guest. He compelled himself to shake hands of farewell, and marched into the house, the set of his back and the way he held his head indicating plainly that he would give free rein to the acute irritation he was feeling when he got there.

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There was a pause when he had disappeared through the windows of the library, and then Mrs. Clinton asked quietly, "Do you think there is any chance of Joan not being required to give evidence at the trial?"

"Well, I'll tell you exactly how it is, Mrs. Clinton," said Bobby, relieved at being able to address himself to somebody who was apparently capable of accepting facts. "If Mrs. Amberley would admit that she had stolen the necklace, and give back the pearls she hadn't made away with, we should drop it, and there wouldn't be any more bother. But I'm bound to say that I don't think she will now. It's gone too far. She brazened it out when my father and mother charged her with it, and she'll go on brazening it out. I think it is bound to come into the courts."

"Will she be charged with the theft?"

"That's not quite settled on. She threatened to bring an action against us if we talked about it. And, of course, we *have* talked. We are quite ready to meet her action, and would rather it came on in that way. But if she doesn't make a move soon, we shall be obliged to. It will be the only chance of getting anything back. We have had detectives working, and it is quite certain that she has sold pearls in Paris within the last month. They are ready to swear to her. She has pawned one in London, too—in the city. So you see we're quite certain about her. Yet it would only be circumstantial evidence, for, of course, nobody could swear to separate pearls; and she might get off. What Miss Joan saw would clinch it. I'm awfully sorry

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about it, since Mr. Clinton feels as he does, but I'm bound to say that I think she ought to be prepared to give her evidence. It wouldn't be fair on us to hold it back, even if it was possible—now would it?"

Mrs. Clinton seemed unwilling to express an opinion, but she told her husband later on, when Bobby Trench had taken himself off, that she feared there would be no help for it, Joan would have to give her evidence, whether they liked it or no.

And so it proved. In answer to his letter to Lord Sedbergh, the Squire received an intimation from his old friend that they had decided to prosecute at once. They had learnt that Mrs. Amberley, who was getting cold-shouldered everywhere, was making arrangements to leave England altogether. They were on the point of having her arrested. He was very sorry that a girl of Joan's age should be mixed up in such an unpleasant affair, but it must be plain that her evidence could not be dispensed with, and he hoped that, after all, the ordeal might not be such a very trying one for her. She would only have to tell her story and stick to it. Everything should be done on their side that was possible to make things easy for her, and the affair would soon blow over.

The Squire, raging inwardly and outwardly, had to bow to circumstances. The day after he had received Lord Sedbergh's letter a summons came for Joan to present herself at a certain police court, and he and Mrs. Clinton took her up to London the same afternoon.

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CHAPTER IV

JOAN GIVES HER EVIDENCE

THE June sunshine, beating through the dusty windows of the Police Court, fell upon a very different assembly from that which was usually to be found in that place of mean omen.

The gay London crowd that was accustomed to pass continuously within a stone's throw of its walls, without giving a thought to those dubious stories of the underworld which were daily elucidated there, had made of it the centre of their interest this morning. Many more than could be accommodated had sought for admission, in order to witness a scene in which the parts would be taken, not by the squalid professionals of crime, but by amateurs of their own high standing. The seedy loafers who were accustomed to congregate there had been shouldered out by a fashionable crowd, amongst which the actors who were to take part in the play found themselves the objects of attentions which some of them could well have dispensed with.

Joan sat between her father and mother, outwardly subdued, inwardly deeply interested. Behind the natural shrinking of a young girl, compelled to stand up and be questioned in public, there was the pluck of her race to support her. It would not be worse than having a tooth stopped, and that prospect had never

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deterred her from appreciation of the illustrated papers in the dentist's waiting-room. So now she sat absorbed by the expectation of what was about to happen, and felt exactly as if she were waiting for the curtain to go up on the first scene of a play she eagerly wanted to see.

She had almost come to feel as if she had been brought up to London to be accused of a crime herself. Her father had been very trying, continually harping back upon that old grievance of her having gone to Brummels in the first instance, and adding to it irritable censure of her fault in unburdening herself to Bobby Trench without consulting him beforehand. She held herself free of offence on either count, but had diplomatically refrained from asserting her innocence, to avoid still further arraignment. She had been inundated with instructions, often contradictory, as to how she should act and speak in the ordeal that lay before her; and if she had been of a nervous temperament might well have been driven into a panic long before she had come within measurable distance of undergoing it, and thus have acquitted herself in such a way as to draw an entirely new range of rebukes upon her head. Her mother had simply told her that she must think before she said anything, and not say more than was necessary; and her uncle, the Judge, at whose house they were staying, had repeated much the same advice, and had made light of what she would have to undergo. So, with her mind not greatly disturbed on that score, she felt a sense of relief at being now beyond her

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father's fussy attempts to blame and direct her at the same time, and able to turn her mind to the interests at hand.

The Squire would probably, even now, have been at her ear with repetitions of oft-given advice had not his own ear been engaged by Lord Sedbergh, who sat on the other side of him.

Lord Sedbergh was an amiable, easy-going nobleman, not without some force of character, but too well off and indolent to care to exercise it in opposition to the society in which circumstances compelled him to move. He and the Squire had been friends at Eton, and also at Cambridge, after which Lord Sedbergh had embraced a diplomatic career, until such time as he had succeeded to the family honours, while Edward Clinton, after a brief period of metropolitan glory as a cornet in the Royal Horse Guards, had married early and settled down to a life of undiluted squiredom. The two had actually never met for over thirty years, and were now discovering that their youthful intimacy had not entirely evaporated during that period. At a moment more free from preoccupation they would have embarked on reminiscences which would have shed considerable warmth on this late meeting; and even as it was the Squire felt that his old friend was still a friend, and that it was not such a bad thing after all to be in a position to lend strength to his just cause.

"That's a very charming girl of yours, Edward," Lord Sedbergh was saying. "Bright and clever and pretty without being spoilt, as young women so quickly

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are now-a-days. We made great friends, she and I, when she stayed with us. I wish we could have spared her this, but I don't think she will be much bothered. They are bound to send the case for trial, and I should think the lady would reserve any defence she may have thought of putting up. Still, I don't like to see young girls brought into a business of this sort, and if we could have done without little Joan's evidence I should have been pleased."

The Squire was soothed by the expression of this very proper spirit, and after a little further conversation was even inclined to think with less annoyance of Joan's disastrous visit to Brummels, since the owner of that house was apparently sane and right-minded, whatever might be said of his family and their associates.

"My boy Bobby," said Lord Sedbergh, "has thrown himself into clearing this up heart and soul. He has a head on his shoulders, and I doubt if we should have been in the position we are if it hadn't been for him."

But the Squire was still incensed against Bobby Trench, and was not prepared to give him credit for being anything but the shallow-pated young fool with the over-free manners who had figured so frequently of late in his diatribes. He might have given some expression to this view of his friend's son, for he had not been accustomed in those early years of comradeship to hold back his opinions, and he was getting to feel more than ever that time and absence had wrought little change between them. But at this moment the curtain rang up for the play, and his attention was diverted.

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There was something of a sensation when Mrs. Amberley stood up before the Court ready to meet her accusers. The Squire's face, as he set eyes upon her for the first time, expressed surprise, condemnation, and disgust. The surprise was at the appearance of a woman of striking if somewhat strange and to him repellent beauty, whose eyes and cheeks flamed indignant protest against her situation, when he had expected to see some sort of haggard siren in an attitude combined of shame and impudence. The condemnation was directed against her air of arrogant scorn, and the bold way in which she looked round upon the assembled throng, allowing her gaze to rest upon those who had brought her there in such a way that she seemed to be the accuser and they the accused, and Lady Sedbergh for one dropped her eyes, unable to meet it. The disgust was at her appearance and attire, which seemed to the Squire a bold flaunting of impudent wickedness in face of highly-placed respectability, as represented by the wives of people like himself, who were not ashamed to show the years which the Almighty had caused to pass over their heads, and wore clothes which might indicate their rank, but were not intended to exhibit the unholy seductions of sex.

Joan, with the merciless arrogance of youth, had said that Mrs. Amberley had struck her as being old. She would not have said so if she had seen her now for the first time. Whether it was owing to art, or to the stimulating flame of her indignation, her face showed none of the ravages of years. If that was owing to

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art alone, it was supreme art, for on a skin that was almost ivory in its pallor the flush stood, not crudely contrasted, but as if a rare variant of that strange whiteness. The great masses of her dull red hair even Lady Sedbergh, now violently antagonistic to her, must have acknowledged herself familiar with from before a time when art would have been brought to their production, whatever share it may have had now in preserving their arresting effect. Her figure, in a gown of clear green, had all the slim suppleness of youth; her great black hat with its heavy plumes, might have been worn by Joan herself. And yet, if she did not look old, or even middle-aged, still less did she look young. Her eager lustrous eyes had seen the weariness of life as well as its consuming pleasures, and could not hide their knowledge; the lines of her face, delicate enough, were not those of youth.

When the preliminaries had been gone through, Lady Sedbergh had to tell her story, which she did with a jumpy loquacity that seemed to indicate that whatever benefit she had obtained from her late rest-cure had by this time evaporated.

The gist of it was that she and Mrs. Amberley had been discussing jewel robberies, and Mrs. Amberley had said that no place was safe for jewels if a clever thief was determined to get hold of them. They had been sitting by the morning-room fire, and the hiding-place in which she had always kept her own more valuable jewels was just at her side. She had not been able to refrain from mentioning it, and showing, under a

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promise of secrecy, where it was. You pressed a spring in the panelling, and found a recess in the stone of the thick wall behind. That might well have been discovered by chance; but what no one who did not know of the secret would expect was that, by turning one of the solid-looking stones on a pivot, a further receptacle was disclosed. No one had known of this but herself and husband, until she had told Mrs. Amberley.

She was accustomed to carry her more valuable jewels with her wherever she went, especially the pearl necklace, and the diamond star, which had also been stolen. This she valued for sentimental reasons, which she did not disclose to the Court. They were both in the secret receptacle when she showed it to Mrs. Amberley, as well as a few other cases containing more or less valuable jewels, none of which had been taken.

It was on the day before her party was to break up that she had showed Mrs. Amberley her hiding-place. She had not worn any of the jewels she had put there that evening, nor visited it again until a month later, when she was about to return to London. Then she had missed the necklace and the star. She had sent a telegram to her husband, who had come down at once, and after hearing her story had gone to see Mrs. Amberley with her. Neither of them had any doubt that she was the only person who could possibly have taken the jewels, as she was the only person who knew where they were kept.

"Have you any questions to ask of the witness?"

"Yes."

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Mrs. Amberley spoke in a low-pitched vibrating voice. She was completely at her ease, and the contemptuous tone in which she asked her questions, and the significant pauses which she made after each confused voluble reply, not commenting upon it, but passing on to the next question, would have been effective if she had been a skilled criminal lawyer, and was much more so considering what she was and what she had at stake.

"We have been intimate friends all our lives, you and I, haven't we?"

Lady Sedbergh admitted it, but explained that she would never have made an intimate friend of anyone who would behave in that way, if she had known what she was really like.

She was permitted to have her say out, with those scornful eyes fixed on her, until she trailed off into ineffective silence, when the next question came.

"What was the first thing that I said to you when you had shown me the cupboard, and shut it up again?"

It needed more than one intervention on the part of the magistrate before it was elicited that Mrs. Amberley had said, "Well, now, if anything happens you can't accuse me. You would know I should be the last person." Lady Sedbergh volunteered the additional information that she had remembered those words, and even repeated them to her husband, but added that she put them down to Mrs. Amberley's cunning.

"But isn't it true that if I had stolen your necklace

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I should have known positively that you would have suspected me at once?"

No volubility would disguise the truth of that, and it had what weight it deserved.

Mrs. Amberley asked no more questions, but her solicitor cross-examined Lady Sedbergh as to the means she had taken to preserve the knowledge of the hiding-place from her own maid, for instance, or from the other servants of the house. He made it appear rather absurd that in a great house, overrun with servants, like Brummels, she could always have carried cases of jewels to and fro without being observed, or that her own maid would have had no curiosity as to where she kept them. The poor lady explained eagerly that she seldom wore the things she kept in her hiding-place when she was in the country, and that there was a safe in her husband's room in which she was supposed to keep what valuables she did not keep upstairs; but she explained so much and so incoherently that it had small effect in view of his persistence. It did seem rather absurd to everybody when her cross-examination was over, that anyone so foolish as she should have been able for so long to keep such a secret from everybody about her, especially in view of the irresponsible and causeless way in which she was shown finally to have let it out. If the case had rested on her testimony alone, Mrs. Amberley would have been acquitted, with hardly an additional stain on her character.

Joan, standing up bravely in her fresh girlhood to tell her story, was far more damaging. Between Mrs.

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Amberley, completely self-possessed, and showing indignation only by the vibrations of her low voice, and Lady Sedbergh, with her flurried, rather pathetic efforts to put herself everywhere in the right, the advantage was on the side of the accused. She had no such foil in the frank bearing of the young girl, whose delicate bloom contrasted with her own exotic beauty only to show that whatever quality it may have had was not that of innocence. Joan repeated what she had told Bobby Trench, in much the same words, and the only discount that could be taken off her evidence was the admission that she had thought nothing of it at all until after she had been told of what Mrs. Amberley was suspected.

It was when she was just about to leave the witness-stand, and the Squire, who had been following the process of question and answer with spasms of nervousness at each fresh speech, was beginning to breathe freely once more, that Mrs. Amberley looked at her with a glance from which, with all her care to avoid the expression of feeling, she could not banish the malice, and asked her, "Would you have said what you did if it had been anybody but Mr. Trench who asked you?"

The insinuation was plain enough, and Joan met it with a warm blush which she would have given worlds to have been able to hold back. She felt the blood warming and reddening her cheeks and her neck, but she answered immediately in spite of it, "It was my sister who asked me what I had seen, when Mr. Trench

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told us both of what you were suspected"; and Mrs. Amberley let the answer pass, with an air of not finding it worth while to take further notice of such a childish person.

Joan made her way back to her seat between her father and mother, the blush slowly fading from her cheeks. She felt outraged at having had such a question put to her, and in such a tone, before all these knowing, sniggering people; and her distress was not lightened by her father saying to her in an angry whisper, "There now, you see what comes of making yourself free in that sort of company." He added, "Confound the woman's impudence!" in a tone still more angry, which took off a little of the edge of his previous speech; and Mrs. Clinton took Joan's hand in hers and pressed it. So presently she recovered her equanimity, and only blushed intermittently when she remembered what had been said to her.

A French jeweller gave evidence of Mrs. Amberley having sold pearls to him in Paris. She had been veiled and hooded, but he was sure it was the same lady. He should have recognised her by her voice alone. He gave the dates of the transactions, three in number; and other evidence was duly brought forward to show that Mrs. Amberley had been in Paris on each of those dates.

A London pawnbroker's assistant gave evidence of her having pawned a single pearl, which he produced. She had done it in her own name. He proved to be an indecisive witness under the pressure of Mrs. Am-

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berley's lawyer, and said he was not sure now that it was the same lady, although he was nearly sure. But there was the transaction duly recorded, and Mrs. Amberley's name and London address entered in his books at the time. Asked whether he thought it likely that a lady who was pawning stolen property, obviously with no idea of redeeming it, would give her own well-known name and address, he recovered himself sufficiently to answer very properly that he had nothing to do with what was likely or unlikely; there was his book.

When all the witnesses had been examined, Mrs. Amberley's lawyer said that he should not oppose the case going for trial. He had advised his client to reserve her defence, but he might say that she had a full and convincing answer to the charge.

When Mrs. Amberley had been duly committed for trial, there was a wrangle as to her being admitted to bail. It was stated in opposition that she was known to have contemplated leaving the country; she had in no way met the convincing evidence that had been brought against her, and in view of the gravity of the offence, &c., &c. Finally, she was admitted to bail on heavy securities, which were immediately forthcoming. One of them was offered by Sir Roger Amberley, her late husband's father, an old man who looked bowed down by shame; the other by Lord Colne, an elderly roué, who, so far from showing shame, appeared proud of his position as friend and supporter of the accused lady. Mrs. Amberley left the court with her father-in-law, and some who were within hearing when she

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thanked her other sponsor remarked that he did not seem likely to get much change out of his liability of two thousand pounds.

The Squire, with his wife and daughter, lunched at the extremely private hotel which he had patronised all his life, and left London for Kencote by an early afternoon train. They were accompanied by Humphrey and Lady Susan Clinton, who had paid no visit to Kencote since they had committed the fault of taking Joan to Brummels; and would not have paid the visit now if they could have got out of it.

But the Squire had insisted. He had sent Mrs. Clinton and Joan on to his brother-in-law's house on their arrival in London the afternoon before, and had gone himself to his son's flat, with the object of unburdening his mind both to Humphrey and his wife. But Humphrey and Susan had been out. He had waited for an hour, getting more and more angry, and convinced that they were seeking to evade him. He had then written a peremptory note, ordering them to join him at the station on the following afternoon, ready to go down to Kencote, with instructions to wire acquiescence immediately on receipt of the order.

The wire had arrived at his brother-in-law's house before he had reached it. "Exceedingly sorry to have missed you. Both delighted come Kencote to-morrow. Humphrey."

The uncalled for expression of delight had not in the least softened his mood of anger, but he had gained a grim satisfaction from feeling that his word was law

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if he chose to make it so. This was added to by the determination to make the visit anything but an occasion of delight, and the anticipation of having somebody fresh on whom to wreak his anger; the satisfaction of relieving his feelings by censure of Joan having now begun to wear rather thin.

If Humphrey was bent on smoothing out the situation, as was probably the case, it was impolitic of him to bring his own man to Kencote as well as his wife's maid. The Squire himself never took a man away with him, except on the rare occasions on which he went anywhere to shoot, and Humphrey's servant was an additional offence. The Squire's temper was not improved when Humphrey, relieved of all anxieties about luggage and tickets and the rest of it, strolled up to him on the platform, dressed in the latest variety of summer country clothes, with the correct thing in spats, and the most modern shade in soft felt hats, and found him fussing over details that he might safely have left to Mrs. Clinton's capable maid.

"Oh, here you are," he said ungraciously. "If you're quite sure that your fellow has done everything for your own comfort, you might tell him to help Parker with those things. I've engaged a carriage, but if I had thought you couldn't travel without your whole establishment I'd have told 'em to put on a saloon."

"We've left the cook and the housemaid behind," said Humphrey, outwardly undisturbed. "Here, Grant, take these things into your carriage."

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The Squire turned his back and went up to the compartment at which his wife was standing with her daughter-in-law and Joan. "Better get in. Better get in," he said. "We don't want to be left behind. How are you, Susan? We've just had a pleasant result from your taking Joan into the company of people like your precious Mrs. Amberley."

Lady Susan made no attempt to avert his displeasure, which had evidently worked itself up to a point at which it must have immediate vent. She shook hands with him, and got into the carriage after Mrs. Clinton. She was a tall, fashionably-dressed woman, with a young, rather foolish face, not remarkably good-looking, but making the most of such points as she possessed. The Squire rather liked her, in spite of his disapproval of many of her ways, partly because she had always treated him with deference, partly—although he would indignantly and conscientiously have denied it—because her title was a suitable ornament to the name she bore. He himself was the head of the family of which hers was a junior branch, but that branch had been ennobled at a date of quite respectable antiquity, and an Earl's daughter is an Earl's daughter wherever she may be found. The mild degree of satisfaction, however, that he felt on this head was quite sub-conscious, and did not lead him to pay any more deference to Lady Susan than he was accustomed to pay to the rest of the women of his family. The only lady in that position whom he treated with marked deference was the wife of his eldest son, who was an American, of no ancestry

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that he would have recognised as significant, who had once for a short period lowered even the ancestry she *could* claim by dancing on the stage. That story has been told elsewhere, and if the reader is inclined to cry snob, because the Squire is admitted to have been pleased that one of his daughters-in-law bore a title, let it be considered that Virginia, Dick's wife, had made a complete conquest of him, and that he valued her little finger above Lady Susan's body.

He began directly the train had started. "Now look here, I've got a word to say to you two, and I may as well say it at once and get it over."

Humphrey, knowing that it was bound to come, was quite ready, but was also aware that to get it over was really the last thing his father wanted. Whatever attitude he might take upon the subject, it would be returned to again and again as long as his visit to the paternal mansion should last. The best he could do was to get it over for the time being, and gain a respite in which to read the "Field" and the other papers with which he had provided himself. To this end he put up no opposition, but admitted with grave face that he and his wife had done wrong, and agreed that subsequent events proved that they had done very wrong indeed.

The Squire would perhaps have preferred to have his annoyance warmed up by a difference of opinion, and was obliged to express it with all the more force, so that it might spontaneously acquire the requisite amount of heat.

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The end of it was rather surprising. He was getting along swimmingly, on a high note of displeasure, when he was brought to a sudden stop by Lady Susan bursting into tears.

Now tears from a woman were what the Squire never could stand. He was essentially kind, and even tender-hearted, in spite of his usual attitude of irritable authority, and, since he had never lived with women who cried easily, he took tears from them very seriously. They meant, of course, for one thing, complete capitulation; for of tears of mere temper he had had no experience whatever; and they appealed to his chivalry as emphasising the weakness of the vessels from which they came.

"Oh, come now!" he said soothingly, and with an expression of discomfort. "No need to cry over it. It's over and done with for the present, and now I've pointed out quietly what a wrong thing it was, I'm quite sure it won't be repeated."

But Susan still continued to sob freely, and Humphrey said with some indignation, "She's very much upset at what's happened. She's taken it much more to heart than you think. It doesn't want rubbing in any more."

"Well, perhaps I've said enough," admitted the Squire, "but you've got to consider that we haven't done with this business yet. We shall have it hanging over us for months, until the trial comes on; and then we shall have to go through it all again. Still, you know, Susan, *you* won't be called as a witness. *You've*

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nothing to cry about. Now, do leave off, my dear girl. Let's put it out of our minds now, and think no more about it till we're obliged to. My dear child, what *is* the matter?"

For Susan's sobs had increased in volume, and now showed some signs of becoming hysterical. Mrs. Clinton essayed to soothe her in her calm sensible way, and Humphrey said kindly, "All right, Susan, we're not going to talk about it any more. We're both sorry we made the mistake we did, and you are not so much to blame for it as I am."

But perhaps it was Joan, who was not greatly moved by a woman's tears, who brought Susan's to an end by remarking, "We are getting near Lemborough. I think this train stops there."

When Susan had dried her eyes, and was able to speak with no more than an occasional hiccough, she said, "I am sorry for Mrs. Amberley. I don't know her very well, and I don't like her, but it's a horrible position to be put in."

"Well, I don't think you need waste much sympathy on *her*," said the Squire. "If that's all you are crying about you might have saved your tears, my dear. She won't get more than she deserves."

"It isn't what I was crying about," said Susan. "You spoke as if all of us who were at Brummels were just the same as she is."

The Squire did privately think that most of them, except Humphrey and Susan themselves, and Lord Sedbergh, and of course Joan, would have been capable of

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acting in the same way as Mrs. Amberley, if necessity and opportunity had prompted them, but he said, "Oh no, Susan. I didn't mean to go nearly so far as that. Still, there's a proverb about evil communications, you know, and I do hope you will take a lesson from this nasty business and steer clear of the sort of people who go in for that kind of thing."

He spoke as if the people received into fashionable society who "went in" for stealing pearl necklaces were easily distinguishable from the rest. This was probably not precisely what he meant, and as Susan plucked up a smile and said, "Well, you've said some very unkind things to me, but I'm going to be a good girl now, and I hope you won't say any more," he allowed the subject to drop altogether, and the rest of the journey passed in peace.

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CHAPTER V

A QUIET TALK

Frank and Nancy were on the platform at Kencote. The Squire, longing for his home whenever he was away from it, like any schoolboy detached from the dear familiar, was pleased to see their smiling faces. They were agreeably surprised by the warmth of his greeting, having expected him to reach home in even a worse state of mind than that in which he had left it, and not having realised that a dreaded ordeal has lost most of its sting when it has been gone through, even if its terrors have been worse than fancy had painted them.

"Well, young people," was his hearty greeting, "I hope you haven't been up to any pranks while we've been away."

Not a word about the police court proceedings; no black looks! They responded suitably to his geniality, and passed on to greet the other members of the family, looking on to the time when one of them could be detached to tell the story of what had happened.

There was no stint of carriages in the Squire's stables, nor of horses to draw or men to drive them. He himself invariably drove his phaeton from the station, enjoying, whatever the weather, the sense of being in the open air, doing one of the things that was a part of his natural life, after being cooped up for a

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couple of hours in a train. On this occasion there was also an open carriage, and the station omnibus for the servants and the luggage. This involved six horses, and five men, in the sober Clinton livery of black cloth with dark green facings, and a general turn out in the way of fine upstanding satin-coated horseflesh, gloss of silver-plated harness, mirror-like carriage varnish, and spick and span retainerhood that would not have disgraced royalty itself. It was indeed with a sense almost akin to that of royalty that the Squire took the salutes of his servants, and threw his eye over such of his vehicular possessions as met it. He *was* undisputed lord of this little corner of the world, and it was good to find himself back in his kingdom, after having been an undistinguished unit amongst London's millions, and especially to breathe its serene air after having had his nostrils filled with the sordid atmosphere of the police court. He took the reins of his pair of greys from his head coachman with a deep sense of satisfaction, and swung himself actively up on to his seat, but not before he had settled exactly who was to ride in which carriage.

Mrs. Clinton always sat by the side of her husband, and did so now. But all the rest had wished to walk. The landau, however, was there, and could not be sent back empty. At least, the Squire asked what was the good of having it sent down if nobody used it. So Humphrey and Susan sacrificed their desire for exercise to his sense of fitness, and Joan, Nancy, and Frank set out to walk the short mile that lay between the

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station and the house, well pleased to find themselves alone together.

The Squire had completely recovered his equanimity for the time being, and his satisfaction at finding himself at home again translated itself into an impulse of good will towards his wife, sitting by his side.

With her soft white hair and comely face, Mrs. Clinton looked a fitting helpmate for a country gentleman getting on in years, but still full of manly vigour. There was rather a splendid air about the Squire, with his massive frame and his look of health and vigour, as he sat up driving his handsome horses; and his wife did not share it. He had married her for love when he had been a young man who might be called splendid without any qualification whatever, the owner of a fine estate at the pitch of its fruitfulness, and an admitted match for all but the very highest. He had chosen her, the daughter of an Indian officer who lived in a small way on the outskirts of the neighbouring town, and had been considered by many to have made a misalliance. But he had never thought so himself. He had made of her a slave to his own preferences, kept her shut up from the time of her marriage, away from the pursuits and the friendships for which her understanding fitted her, and unconsciously belittled that understanding by demanding that in all things she should bring her intelligence down on a level with his. But he had trusted her more than he knew, and on the rare occasions on which she had quietly asserted herself to influence him he had followed her, and, without acknowl-

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edging or even feeling himself to have been in the wrong, had afterwards been glad of it. By giving way to him on an infinity of small matters, but not so small to her as to have avoided a sacrifice of many strong inclinations, she had kept her power to guide him in greater matters. Whatever it may have been to her, his marriage had brought him all that he could ever have desired. She had brought him, perhaps, more submission than had been good for him. His native capacity for domineering had thriven on it; because he had never had to meet any big troubles in his married life, he had always made much of little ones; because she had so seldom opposed him, he took opposition from any quarter like a thwarted child. But she had made him always beneath the surface contented with her; never once in the forty years of their marriage, when he had gone about angrily chewing a grievance, had she been the cause of it. Nothing that she might have struggled for and won in her own life would have outweighed that.

Now, with her own thoughts about what had happened strong in her, she had to sit and listen to his views, which were fortunately more cheerfully coloured than they had been for some days past.

"Well, that's over for the present," was the burden of his speech, but when he had so expressed himself with sundry variations, he found something else to comment upon.

Susan's tears! They had moved him. "I think she's all right at heart," he said. "She's had a shock."

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"Yes," said Mrs. Clinton. "I am glad that she is to be with us for a day or two."

The Squire considered this. Without any remarkable powers of discernment, he was yet not entirely incapable of interpreting his wife's sober judgments.

"It will be a rest for her," he said. "She will want to forget it. Yes. That's all very well—if she's learnt her lesson."

Mrs. Clinton left him to make his own decision. "I shall certainly have a talk with Humphrey," he said, rather grudgingly.

"Yes, Edward. If you have a quiet talk with him, I feel sure that he will respond. He is in the mood for it."

A quiet talk was not exactly what the Squire had promised himself when he had summoned Humphrey and Susan to Kencote. But perhaps his wife was right. She often was in these matters. And he had worked off a good deal of his irritation already in the train. Yes, a quiet talk would be the thing; and Susan should be left out of it. She had been reduced to tears once, and it would be disturbing if that should happen again. She might be considered to have learnt her lesson, as far as a woman could learn any lesson. The wholesome influence of Kencote might be left to work in her repentant soul. He would deny himself the satisfaction of rubbing it in.

The quiet talk took place as father and son walked out together after tea to see the young birds. Frank had to be prevented from making a third in the expedi-

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tion, and there was interruption from keepers, from dogs, and from the young birds themselves, whose place in the scheme of things it was to be discussed, in the month of June. But it was a satisfactory talk all the same, and the Squire was pleased, and a little surprised, at his own kindly reasonableness.

"I was sorry to make Susan cry in the train. At least I wasn't altogether sorry—it showed she took to heart what I had said to her."

"Oh yes. She took it to heart all right. The whole business has given her a bit of a shock."

"Exactly what I said to your mother. She's had a shock. Well, it isn't a bad thing to have a shock sometimes. It brings you to your senses if you've been going wrong. I don't want to be hard on you, my boy; but I shan't regret all the worry and unpleasantness I've been put to if it has the effect of making you think a bit about the way you have been going on, and changing your way of life—you and Susan both."

"Yes." Humphrey had not yet realised that the talk was to be a quiet one. It was not unusual for openings of this sort to develop into something that, however it might be viewed, could not be described as quiet. He was ready to be quiet himself; but he would give no handles if he could help it.

The Squire, however, could not altogether dispense with some sort of a handle, although he was prepared to grasp it softly.

"You feel that yourself, eh?" he said. "You do recognise that you've been going wrong, what?"

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"Oh yes," said Humphrey readily. "We've been spending too much money, and I'm sick of it. It isn't good enough."

This was not quite what the Squire wanted. If Humphrey had been spending too much money, he must be in debt; and if he was sick of it, he would obviously want to get out of debt. He did not want the quiet talk to follow the path of suggestions as to how that might be done.

"Well, if you've been spending too much money," he said, not without adroitness, "you can easily spend less. You have a very handsome income between you, and could have anything anybody could reasonably want if you only spent half of it. The fact is, you know, my boy, that you can't live the life you and Susan have been living with any lasting satisfaction. Your Uncle Tom preached a capital sermon about that last Sunday. It was something to the effect of doing your duty in the world instead of looking out for pleasure, and it would be all the better for you, both here and hereafter. I don't pose as a saint—never have—but, after all, your religion's a real thing, or it isn't. I can only say that mine has been a comfort to me, many's the time. I have had my fair share of annoyances, and it has enabled me to get through them, hoping for a better time to come. And it has done more than that; it's made me see that a life of pleasure is a dangerous thing, by Jove, and the man's a fool who goes in for it."

"Well, it depends on what you mean by pleasure."

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"That's not very difficult to see, is it? Dancing about after amusement all day and half the night; rushing here, rushing there; never doing anything for the good of your fellow-creatures; getting more and more bored with yourself and everybody else; never——"

"Is that what you would call pleasure?"

"What *I* should call pleasure? No, thank God, it isn't. I'd sooner break stones on the road than live a life like that."

"Well, there you are, you see. What you would really call pleasure is something quite different. I suppose it would be to live quietly at home in the country, just as you *are* doing. There's nothing dangerous in that."

"Of course there isn't. It's the best life for any man, if the Almighty has put him into the position of enjoying it. It's a life of pleasure in a way—yes, that's perfectly true; but it's a life of duty too, and stern duty, by Jove, very often. You can't be always thinking about yourself. You've got responsibilities, in a position like mine, and you've got to remember that some day you'll have to give an account of them. We'll just go in here and see Gotch; I want a word with him about his bill for meal."

Gotch's bill for meal, and the welfare of the young birds under his charge having been duly discussed, the walk and the quiet talk were resumed.

"Well, as I was saying—what was it I was saying?"

"You were pointing out that a big landowner had

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a jolly good time, but that he would have to give an account of all the fun he'd had by and by."

"Eh? Well, that wasn't quite how I meant to put it. But you say yourself you are sick of the life you've been leading—and I don't wonder at it—and I wanted to show you that you can gain much more satisfaction by living quietly in the country, and amusing yourself in a healthy way, and doing your duty towards those dependent on you, than by living that unhealthy rackety London life. Look at Dick. There's no fellow who lived more in the thick of things than he did; but he kept his head through it all, and now the time has come for him to settle down here he's ready to do it, and I should think enjoys his life as much as any man could. It was just the same with me, only I gave it up sooner than he did. I had my two years in the Blues, and then I married and settled down here; and I've never regretted it."

"No, I don't suppose you have. The life suits you down to the ground, and Dick too. It would suit me if I were in your place, or Dick's."

"Well, you could easily live the life that Dick lives, and you would find your money went a good deal further, if you made up your mind to do it. I wish you would. You would be a happier man in every way, and Susan would be a happier woman."

"I'm not sure of that. We might for a time, but we should miss a lot of things. You can amuse yourself in the country well enough half the year, but not all the year round; and we couldn't afford both."

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"My dear boy, I've been trying to tell you. You are going on the wrong tack altogether if you are always thinking about amusing yourself. It isn't the way to look at life. Every man has duties to perform."

"What duties should I have to perform? I'm not a landowner, and never likely to be one. If I lived in the country I should hunt a bit and shoot a bit; and for the rest of the time I don't know what I should do."

"Well, if you lived near here, you could be put on the bench. There's a lot of useful work that a man living on the income you have can do in keeping things going. In these times the more gentry there are living in a place, the better it is for the country all round. What do you do as it is? It can't be satisfactory to anybody to live year after year in a whirl. There's not a single thing you do in London that's good for you that you couldn't do better in the country."

"I don't know about that. There's music for one thing, and pictures and plays. I'm not altogether the brainless voluptuary, you know. There's a lot goes on in London that keeps your mind alive, and you drop that if you bury yourself in the country."

"Stuff and nonsense!" exclaimed the Squire, but with persistent good humour. "Don't I keep my mind alive? You'd have the 'Times' and the 'Spectator'; and there are lots of clever people in the country. Look at Tom! He hardly ever goes near London. Hates the place. But I'll guarantee that he reads as much as any Bishop, and knows what's going on in the

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world as well as anybody. No, my dear boy, it won't do. I don't say there aren't people it suits to be in London. Herbert Birkett, for instance!" (This was Mrs. Clinton's brother, the Judge.) "But he's been brought up to it. He hasn't got the tastes of a country gentleman, wouldn't be happy away from the Athenæum Club, and all that sort of thing. And George Senhouse, with his Parliament and his committees and so on. That's a different thing. They've got their work to do. But don't tell me you are like that. Yours is a different life altogether. They spend theirs amongst sober, God-fearing people—at least George Senhouse does. Of course, Herbert Birkett was a Radical, and I shouldn't like to answer for the morals of all *his* friends, even now. But, anyhow, they're not the sort that would make a bosom friend of a woman like that Mrs. Amberley."

"Well, I don't know that I should make a bosom friend of her myself. But she's no worse than a lot of others. She's been found out—that's all—and, of course, the whole pack are in full cry after her now."

"My dear boy, you are surely not going to stand up for a woman convicted of a vulgar theft!"

"She hasn't been convicted yet. But even if she is guilty, as I suppose she is, one can't help feeling a bit sorry for her. You don't know what may have driven her to it. Amberley left her badly off, and it's a desperate thing for a woman to be worried night and day by debt. That's what Susan feels. She's known it in a sort of way herself. You know the dust-up we

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had a couple of years ago, when you kindly came to the rescue. Well, I suppose that brings it home to her. She doesn't care for Rachel Amberley any more than I do, but she can't take the line about this business that most people take; and I'm inclined to think she's right. After all—you were talking about religion just now—it seems to me that religion ought to prevent you judging harshly of people who have got into trouble."

The Squire's upper lip went down. "Flagrant dishonesty is not a thing that you can judge leniently, and no religion in the world would tell you to do so," he said. "You've got to keep to certain lines, or everything goes by the board. I don't like to hear you upholding such views."

"It is all a question of how you are situated. It would be impossible to think of you, for instance, stealing anything. You wouldn't have the smallest temptation to. But you might do something else that would be just as bad."

"*I* might do something just as bad—something dishonourable!"

"You never know. You might have a sudden temptation. Of course, it wouldn't come in any way you expected! You might act on the spur of the moment."

The Squire stopped and faced his son. "That's a very foolish thing to say," he said with a frown. "A man of principle doesn't act dishonourably on the spur of the moment. Doesn't honour count for anything with you?"

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Humphrey walked on, and the Squire walked with him.

"I say you don't know what you'd do if an unexpected temptation came. You don't know how strong your principles are till they are tried."

"They *are* tried. They are always being tried, in little ways. A man leads an upright life, as far as in him lies, and if a big question comes up, he's ready for it."

"It depends on how much he is tried," said Humphrey. "I say you never know."

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CHAPTER VI

THE YOUNG BIRDS

"It's a horrid thing for a young girl to have to go through."

John Spence fitted two walnuts together in the palms of his big hands and cracked them with a sudden tightening of the muscles. His good-humoured ruddy face was solicitous. "I think they ought to have kept her out of it," he said.

The dark-panelled dining-room of the Dower House framed a warm picture of two men and two women sitting at the round table, bright with lights and flowers, old silver and sparkling glass. A fire of applewood twinkled on the hearth; for September had come round, and one section at least of the young birds, now adolescent, were about to discover for themselves what their elders had possibly warned them of: that those great brown creatures, whom they had hitherto known only as protective census-takers, became as dangerous as stoats and weasels when the dew began to lie thick on the grass.

John Spence had come down for the first day among the Kencote partridges, leaving his own stubbles, which were more copiously populated, until later. Dick Clinton had generally started the season with him. The Kencote partridges ranked second to the Kencote

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pheasants, and could very well bide the convenience of those who were to kill them. But they had done very well this year, and it was becoming less easy to draw Dick away from his home.

"It's good of old John to put off his own shoot and come down here," he had said to his wife, when he had received the somewhat unexpected acceptance of his invitation.

Virginia had looked at him out of her great dark eyes, and there had been amusement in them, as well as the half-protective affection which they always showed towards her handsome husband; but she had said nothing to explain the amusement, and he had not noticed it.

The party at the dinner-table was discussing Mrs. Amberley's trial, which was to come on in the following month.

"Joan has got her wits about her," said Dick. "She answered up very well in the police court, and I don't suppose it will be any more terrible next month."

"Still, I think it's beastly for her," persisted his friend. "That woman—putting it to her publicly about Trench! I read it in the evidence."

"It was a piece of bluff," said Dick. "Still, she ought to have her neck wrung for it."

"A cat!" said Miss Dexter, Virginia's friend, square-faced and square-figured. "A spiteful, pilfering cat!"

"Poor darling little Joan!" said Virginia. "She hates the very name of Bobby Trench now, and she

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used to make all sorts of fun of him and his love-making before."

"Oh, he made love to her, did he?" asked Spence.

"Don't talk such nonsense, Virginia," said Dick maritally. "He knew the twins when they were children; looks on them as children now. So they are. He's years older than Joan."

"Still, she's a very pretty girl," said John Spence. "And so is Nancy."

Virginia laughed. "It's the same thing," she said.

"Well, I don't know," said John Spence judicially. "In appearance, yes—perhaps so. But there is a difference. You see it more now they are grown up. I think Nancy is cleverer. Of course, they're both clever, but I should say Nancy read more books and things. And what I like about Nancy is that with all her brains she's a real good country girl. I must say I don't care about these knowing young women you meet about London, and in other people's houses."

Virginia laughed again. "Tell Mr. Clinton that," she said. "He will think you one of the most sensible of men."

"Well, I don't profess to be a clever fellow myself," said John Spence modestly; "but I like a girl to have brains and know how to use 'em, and I like her to like the country. It's what I like myself; and if Mr. Clinton thinks the same I'm with him all the time."

"Mr. Clinton might not insist upon the brains," said Miss Dexter.

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Virginia held up her finger. "Toby!" she said warningly, "we don't criticise our relations-in-law."

Dick grinned indulgently at his neighbour. "How you'll let us have it when you go away from here!" he said.

"I always do let you have it," she replied uncompromisingly. "You think such a deal of yourselves that it does you all the good in the world. But I don't wait till I go away."

"I was rather sorry that Joan got let into that gang of people at all," said John Spence. "They're no good to anybody. It hasn't altered her at all, has it? She and Nancy were the jolliest pair. Lord, how they made me laugh when they were kids, and I first came down here!"

He laughed now at the remembrance, a jolly, robust laugh which wrinkled his firm, weathered skin, and showed his white teeth. "I shouldn't like to see either of them spoiled by going about to houses like Brummels," he said, with a return to seriousness. "I don't believe Nancy would have cared about it."

"She would have gone just the same as Joan," said Miss Dexter, "if she had happened to be in the way of it, and she would have behaved just the same; that is, just as she ought to have behaved. You seem to think that Joan is smirched because she has been let in, through no fault of hers, for this horrid thing. You're as bad as Mrs. Amberley."

John Spence received this charge with an "Oh, I

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say!" But he added, "All the same, I wish it hadn't happened."

The guns met the next morning at the corner by the Dower House. The Squire brought with him Sir Herbert Birkett, the judge, and Sir George Senhouse, who had married the judge's daughter. Neither of them would be expected to do much execution amongst the young birds, but the Squire was strong on family ties, and liked to have his relatives to shoot with him, more especially when he was going to shoot partridges.

The twins and Lady Senhouse were of the party, and Virginia and Miss Dexter. It was a family occasion, and John Spence, knowing that it was to be so, had felt glad, when he had looked out of his window in the morning, that he had put off the inauguration of his campaign amongst his own young birds in order to take part in it.

Joan and Nancy, in workmanlike tweeds, gave him smiling welcome. Previously, when he had shot at Kencote, and they had gone out with the guns, they had disputed amicably as to which of them should walk and stand with him, and the one who had won the dispute had taken bold possession of him. Neither did so this morning, and it was left to him to give an invitation.

"Well, Joan," he said, when they were ready to move off, "are you going to keep me company?"

"Yes," said Nancy instantly. "I am going with Uncle Herbert."

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"But you will come with me after lunch," said John Spence, with a trifle of anxiety.

"All right," she threw over her shoulder.

They walked over a field of roots. A single bird got up some little distance away and flew parallel to the line. Spence snapped it off neatly. "I'm going to shoot well to-day," he said with satisfaction. "I like a gallery, you know, Joan. I say, Nancy's not annoyed about anything, is she?"

"Not that I know of. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. I thought she seemed as if she didn't much want to come with me."

"You see we're grown up now," said Joan. "We can't seize you by the arm, as we used to do, and see which can pull hardest. We have to wait till you ask us."

They had come to a high, rather blind fence, and the line had spread out, and was waiting. Joan and John Spence were practically alone, except for Spence's wise and calm retriever.

He looked down at her with the kind elder brotherly smile which, with his frank and simple appreciation of their humours, had so endeared him to the twins. "I say, that's awful rot, you know," he said.

Joan was conscious of pleasure and some relief as she met his eyes. She wanted nothing more than that things should be between the three of them as they had always been. She had come to think that perhaps, after all, Nancy wanted nothing more, either; but she did not know, because they had not talked about

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John Spence together lately. If this visit should show him to be what he had always been, they would talk about him together again, and perhaps that was what she wanted at the moment more than anything; for it was a source of discomfort to her that there was a subject taboo between Nancy and herself.

"It may be sad," she said. "But it isn't rot. We are grown up, and there is no getting over it."

A shadow came over his face. "They've been teaching you things," he said. "When I came down here last, and you were away in London—and at Brummels—Nancy was just the same as she had always been. I don't see any reason why you should alter."

"Dear old Jonathan! We'll never alter—to you," said Joan affectionately. But she was conscious of a little pang.

The birds began to come over. John Spence accounted for his due share of them. "I wish I'd got another gun," he said. "You've done well with them this year."

When they all came together for lunch, Nancy said to Joan, "Uncle Herbert is in splendid form—I don't mean over shooting, for he has hardly hit anything. Has Jonathan been amusing?"

"No, not at all," said Joan. "He has been lecturing me. He is getting old; he is just like father. I will gladly change with you."

Nancy stared, but said nothing. She and Joan were accustomed to criticise everybody. But they had never yet criticised John Spence.

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"Well, my dear Joan," said the Judge, as she took her place by his side after lunch, "I heaped disgrace upon myself this morning, and I very much doubt if I shall wipe any of it off this afternoon. The Kencote partridges are too many for me—too many and too fast. Why do I still pursue them, at my age and with my reputation? Is it a genuine love of sport, or mere vanity?"

"Vanity, I think," said Joan. "You don't really care about it, you know. You are not like Mr. Spence, and father, and the boys, who think about nothing else."

"It is true that I do think of other things occasionally. But where does the vanity come in? Enlighten me for my good."

"Men are like that. Mr. Spence wouldn't be in the least ashamed at being ignorant of all the things that you know about, but you would be quite ashamed of not knowing something about sport."

"A searching indictment, my dear Joan. It comes home to me. I am a foolish and contemptible old man. And yet I do rather like it, you know. The colours of the trees and the fields, this delicious Autumn air—the expectation—ah!"

The advance guard of a covey had whizzed over his head unharmed; the rest came on, swerving in their rapid flight as if to dodge the charges from his barrels, which all except one of them succeeded in doing.

"More coming. I shall be ready for them next

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time," he said, hastily ramming cartridges into his breach.

More came—and most of them went. He had been in the best place, and had only killed three birds.

"I must be content with that," he said with a sigh. "It is not bad for me. Your John Spence would have shot three times as many, but he would not have got more fun out of it than I have. Joan, it is not all vanity."

Joan spent a pleasant afternoon, but she did not feel as happy over it as she would have done a year ago. When she and Nancy summed up the experiences of the day she said, "I don't mind whether Uncle Herbert can shoot or not. It is much more amusing to be with him than with any of the others."

"Jonathan said you weren't half as keen on sport as you used to be," said Nancy. "He thinks you are becoming fashionable."

"Idiot!" said Joan. Then she suddenly felt as if she wanted to cry, but terror at the idea of doing anything so unaccountable—before Nancy—dried up the desire almost as soon as it was felt. "I am afraid I am getting too old for Jonathan," she said. "He is beginning to bore me."

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CHAPTER VII

THE VERDICT

THE Squire rang his bell violently, with a loud exclamation of impatience. It was a handbell, on a table by the side of his easy chair, in front of which was a baize-covered rest, with his foot, voluminously swathed, upon it.

A servant answered the bell with but little loss of time. "Hasn't the groom come back yet?" asked the Squire, in a tone of acute annoyance. "I told him to waste no time. He must have been dawdling."

"He was just a-coming into the yard when your bell rang, sir," replied the man.

"Well, then, why—— ? Ah, here they are at last. Give them to me, Porter."

The butler had come in with a big roll of newspapers, which the Squire seized from him and opened hurriedly, choosing the most voluminous of them, and throwing the others on to the floor by his side.

THE SOCIETY TRIAL. FULL REPORT. VERDICT.

It filled a whole page, and a column besides.

The Squire read steadily; his face, set to a frowning censure, showed gleams of surprise, and every now

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and then his lips forced an expression of disgust. He was not a rapid reader, and it was half an hour before he put down the paper, and after looking into the fire for a minute, took up another from the floor. At that moment the door opened, and a large elderly man with a mild and pleasant face came into the room. He was dressed in a dark pepper-and-salt suit, with a white tie, and shut the door carefully behind him.

"Ah, my dear Tom!" said the Squire. "You had Nina's telegram, I suppose. I sent it down to you directly it came."

"Yes," said the Rector. "I was surprised that it should all have been over so quickly. How is your foot this morning, Edward?"

"Oh, all right. At least, it isn't all right. I had a horrible night—never slept a wink. I've got the papers here. The woman ought to have got penal servitude. Yes, it was over quickly. It was all as plain as possible, and I'm glad she did herself no good by her monstrous lies. The gross impudence of it! Evidently she'll stick at nothing. But I forgot. You haven't seen the evidence. Here, read this! Would it be believed that she could have put up such a defence? That bit there!"

The Rector deliberately fixed a pair of gold-rimmed glasses on to his nose, and took the paper, looking up occasionally from his reading as his brother interjected remarks, which interrupted but did not seem to irritate him.

"I don't quite understand, Edward," he said, when he

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had finished the passage to which his attention had been drawn. "She says the pearls she sold were given to her by somebody, but the name is not mentioned. Apparently there was a wrangle about it."

"Oh, my dear Tom," said the Squire, "can't you see what it all means? It is as plain as the nose on your face. A wicked, baseless scandal."

The Rector returned to the newspaper, but his air of bewilderment remained.

"Oh well," said the Squire with an impatient glance at him. "You don't live in the world where these things are talked about. I don't either, thank God. But one hears things. This infamous woman has posed as the—the friend—the mistress—yes, actually wanted it to be thought that she was the mistress, of—— No, I'm not going to say it; I won't sully my lips, or put ideas into your head. It's untrue, absolutely untrue, and people in that position are defenceless. She ought not to bring in their names even in idle talk. I'm very glad indeed that there was a strong stand made in the court."

The Rector had re-read the passage, and looked up with a slight flush on his cheeks—almost the look that an innocent girl might have shown if some shameful suggestion had come home to her. "It is not——" he hazarded.

"Oh, not here," the Squire took him up. "Paris. But it is all the more abominable. I don't believe a word of it. And even if it were true—— But is it a likely story?"

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"I hope not," said the Rector gravely.

"Oh, these things do happen; I don't deny that. One can't judge these people quite the same as ourselves. But what a preposterous idea! Pearls worth thousands! And at the very time when this necklace of Lady Sedbergh's was missing, and she was practically seen taking it! Joan saw her. I'm glad they didn't worry Joan too much over her evidence. I'm glad it's over for the child. It's annoyed me most infernally to be tied by the leg here, and not knowing what might be going on, where I couldn't direct or advise. However, she did very well—gave her answers simply and stuck to them, and there was no more of that impudent suggestion about young Trench, I'm glad to say, except that they tried to make out he had put it all into her head. He's quite a decent fellow, that woman's counsel. Herbert Birkett knows him. It's pretty plain that he was only making the best of a bad job—couldn't expect to get the woman off, especially after she had put herself out of court in the way she did."

"I see," said the Rector, who had been reading steadily while this speech was being delivered, "that there was evidence from several people that she *had* worn a pearl necklace, before the time Lady Sedbergh's was stolen."

"Yes, and if you'll read further, you'll see that her maid declares that it was a sham one. She told her so herself. They tried to make out that she wanted to put her off the scent. But that won't wash. The maid gave her evidence very well. You'll see it towards

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the end. It is what clinched it. She had seen the diamond star in the woman's jewel-box. Of course she has made away with it somehow, since; but the maid described it exactly. She had had it in her hands, and there was an unusual sort of catch, which she couldn't have heard about. She told her young man, and he went to the police. Oh, it's *proved*. It isn't only circumstantial evidence, it's damning proof. And she's got far less than her deserts. A year's imprisonment! She ought to have had ten years' hard labour."

"They seem to have convicted her on the theft of the diamond star alone."

"Yes, I don't quite understand why, except that there is no conceivable doubt as to that. I suppose her impudent lie about the necklace saved her, as far as that goes. It led them to drop the charge, as they had got her on the other. I must read the evidence again."

The Rector put the paper aside, and took off his glasses. "Poor woman!" he said, with a sigh. "Her life ruined! But it is well for her that she has been found out. Her punishment will balance the account against her; she will get another start."

"Not in this country," said the Squire vindictively. "She is done for. Nobody will look at her again. I think one can say that much, at any rate. Society is disgracefully loose now-a-days; but there are some things it *can't* stomach. I'm glad to think that this woman is one of them. We shall hear no more of Mrs. Amberley."

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"Ah, well," said the Rector, after a pause. "The world is not made up of what is called Society. Thank God there are men and women who will not turn away from a repentant sinner. Who knows but what this poor woman may win her soul out of the disgrace that has befallen her?"

"Oh, my dear Tom!" said the Squire. "You live in the clouds. A woman like that hasn't got a soul."

Mrs. Clinton and Joan, with Dick and Virginia, returned to Kencote that evening. The Squire received his wife and daughter as if they had been playing truant, and intimated that now they *had* come home they had better put everything that had been happening out of their heads. They had seen for themselves what came of mixing with those sort of people, and he hoped that the lesson had not been wasted. The whole affair had given him an infinity of worry, and had no doubt brought on the attack from which he was suffering. It was all over now, and he didn't want to hear another word about it. In fact, it was not to be mentioned in the house. Did Joan understand that? He would not have her and Nancy talking about it. They had plenty of other things to talk about. Did she understand that?

Joan said that she quite understood it, and went off to give Nancy a full account of her experiences.

"My dear, she looked awful," she said. "She was wonderfully dressed, and had got herself up so that only a woman could have known that she was got up at all. But she looked as old as the hills. Honestly,

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I felt sorry for her, although I hated her for what she said to me before. But she was fighting for her life, and she made a brave show."

"But she couldn't say anything, could she? I thought the counsel did it all."

"Yes, that was the worst of it—for her. She had to stand there while they fought over her, and look all the time as if she didn't care. Awful! Poor thing, she's in prison now, and I should think she's glad of it."

"I don't know in the least what happened, except that she was sent to prison for a year. Father kept all the papers in his room."

"I don't know much either. Directly I had given my evidence mother took me away."

"We'll get hold of a paper."

"No, we mustn't. Mother asked me not to."

"What a bore! What was it like, giving your evidence? Were you alarmed?"

"No, not much. It wasn't worse than the other place. It wasn't so bad. Sir Edward Logan, the Sedberghs' counsel, was awfully sweet. He made me say exactly what I had seen, and when Sir Herbert Jessop—that was *her* man—tried to worry me into saying that Bobby Trench had put it all into my head, he got up and objected."

"Did he try to——"

"No. He was quite nice about it, really. I suppose he had to try and make it out different, somehow. He left off directly our counsel objected, and the old

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Judge said I had given my evidence very well and clearly. I don't think he really believed that I was making it all up."

"You didn't hear what anybody else said?"

"Not a word. Except when I was in the witness-box myself, I might just as well have been at home."

"I wonder what the papers said about you. I wish we could see them."

What those of the papers had said which gave their readers a description as well as a report of what had occurred, was that Miss Joan Clinton had appeared in the witness-box in a simple but becoming costume, which some of them described, and given her evidence clearly and modestly. Some of them said that she was pretty, and one, with a special appeal to the nonconformist conscience, said that it was a pity to see a young lady who from her appearance could not long since have left the schoolroom, and who looked and spoke as if she had been well brought up, involved in the sordid life of what was known as the higher circles, brought to light by these proceedings. The Squire had read this comment with a snort of indignation. But for the quarter from which it came he would have recognised it as coinciding with his own frequently expressed opinion. As it was, he considered it an impertinent reflection upon himself and his order.

When Dick came up to see him that evening he did not insist that the subject should not be mentioned again. He asked him why he had not come in on his way from the station. "There has been nobody to tell

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me a thing," he said with some irritation. "I only know what I have read in the papers. Upon my word, the woman's brazen insolence! Was that why they dropped the charge of stealing the necklace, Dick?"

"The other was dead certain," said Dick.

"Ah, that's what I thought. But people don't think—er——"

"He *did* give her pearls," said Dick, with a matter-of-course air of inner knowledge. "And plenty of people have seen her wearing them, though she never seems to have worn them in London."

"Then it's true about——"

"About him? Of course it is."

"Oh! I thought she had made it up, shamelessly, because she knew it couldn't be contradicted."

"It could have been contradicted easily enough if it hadn't been true. Everybody has known about it for years."

"But she told the maid the pearls were sham ones."

"I dare say she did. But they weren't."

"Then there is really a doubt whether she did steal the necklace?"

"Oh, I don't think so. It makes it all the more likely. She would think, if it was found out she had got rid of single pearls, she could explain it by her own necklace. The mistake she made was in not being satisfied with taking the pearls. If she had left that rotten little star alone, which can't have been worth more than a hundred pounds or so, I doubt if they would have brought it home to her."

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"But she may have taken the star, and not have had time to find the necklace, when Joan came in."

"Oh no. If she had been in the middle of it Joan would have caught her at it. There was the stone to push back, as well as the panel to shut. Besides, the necklace went. Who did take it, if she didn't? Nobody else knew."

"Oh, it's plain enough, of course. I haven't a doubt about it. But I thought you meant that there *was* some doubt."

"No. I only meant there might have been, if she hadn't taken the star. Of course, what she did was to get rid of those pearls as well as her own. She hasn't known which way to turn for money for ever so long. She went out of favour in *that* quarter a couple of years ago, or more."

"Did she make any attempt to get her story backed up?"

"Moved heaven and earth, but found the doors shut. She found herself up against the police over there. They told her that if she dared to whisper such a story she would get into more serious trouble than she was in already. She's got pluck, you know. She must have seen it was no good, but she was in a royal rage, and made her people bring it up, out of spite. They say there were hints given; but I doubt that—in a court of law. Anyhow, they wouldn't have it, and it didn't do her any good."

"Well, it's a most unsavoury story altogether," said

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the Squire. "The woman's in prison now, and she richly deserves it."

He and Dick discussed the matter for another hour, and when the Squire was helped up to bed he repeated his injunctions to Mrs. Clinton that it was not to be mentioned in the house again.

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BOOK II

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CHAPTER I

BOBBY TRENCH IS ASKED TO KENCOTE

"WELL, old fellow, I think you might."

It was Bobby Trench who spoke, in a voice of injured pleading.

Humphrey laughed. "My dear chap," he said, "I would, like a shot; but, to be perfectly honest with you, you haven't succeeded in commending yourself to the Governor, and, after all, it's his house and not mine."

They were driving to a meet of hounds. Humphrey had so far taken to heart his father's criticisms upon his metropolitan mode of life that he had let his flat for the winter and taken a hunting box in Northamptonshire, at which Bobby Trench was a frequent visitor. He was being asked by his friend to repeat the invitation he had given him some years before, to stay at Kencote for some country balls, and he was kindly but firmly resisting the request.

"I suppose you know what I want to go there for?"

"Well, I can form a rough guess. As far as I'm concerned, I should welcome the idea; but I won't disguise it from you that the Governor wouldn't."

"Well, hang it! I may have trod on his corns—though I certainly never meant to, and I like him and all that—but you can't say that I'm not all right.

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I'm an only son, and all that sort of thing. I don't see how he could expect to get anybody better."

"Do you really mean business, Bobby?"

"Yes, I do; if I can hit it off with her. She's bowled me over. She's as pretty as paint, and as bright and clever as they make 'em. Sweet-tempered and kind-hearted too; and I like that about a girl. She was as nice as possible to my old Governor; took a lot of trouble about him. He thinks the world of her. I tell you, he'd be as pleased as Punch."

"Have you said anything to him?"

"No, not yet. To tell you the truth—I'm a modest fellow, though I'm not always given the credit for it—I'm not in the least certain whether she'll see it in the same light as I do. I dare say that's what's brought it on, you know. They've been after me for years—it's only natural, I suppose—but what these old dowagers, and lots of the young women themselves too, don't seem to understand is that a man doesn't *like* being run after. It puts him off. That's human nature. Well, I needn't tell *you* that it's me that's got to do all the running this time; and it's a pleasant change. I suppose she's never said anything to you about me, has she?"

Humphrey laughed. He remembered a few of the things that Joan had said to him about his friend.

"She looks on you as a stupendous joke so far," he said. "Still, she's hardly more than a kid."

"Oh, I know. Tell you the truth, when I first felt myself drawn that way, I said, 'No, Robert. Plenty of time yet. If you feel the same in a couple of years'

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time, you can let yourself go.' But I don't know. Some other fellow might come along; and I'm not fool enough to think I've made such an impression that I can afford to keep away and let my hand play itself. No, what I want is to get my chance; I know now what I'm going to do with it, and I tell you I'm keener than I've ever been about anything in my life. Look here, Humphrey, you've got to get me down to Kencote somehow after Christmas. I never see her anywhere else. You ought not to keep those girls shut up as you do, you know."

"*I* keep them shut up! You talk as if I were the head of my respected family. Well, look here. If it has really gone as far as you say it has, you'd better write to the Governor. I tell you plainly, he doesn't think much of *you;* but he's an old friend of your father's, and he'd probably be no more averse to seeing one of his daughters marry a future peer than anybody else would. It wouldn't go all the way with him, but it would go some of the way."

"No, thanks. That's not my way of doing things. I want to be loved for myself. If he did take to the idea, it wouldn't do me any good to be shoved forward in that sort of light. Besides, to tell you the truth, I don't believe I should be half so keen if I was asked down with that idea."

"Oh, well!" said Humphrey with a spurt of offence. "If that's how you feel about it——! I don't care a damn about your peerage, and all that sort of thing; I was only thinking it might help you over a fence with

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the Governor. My young sister is good enough for any fellow."

"I know that. I should consider myself jolly lucky if she took me. You needn't get shirty. It's just because she *is* the girl I want that I'm not going to lose any of the fun of winning off my own bat."

"I'll see what I can do," said Humphrey, after further conversation. "But if you go to Rome you've got to do as Rome does. You know what my Governor is; and he's got a perfect right to run his own show as it suits him, and not as it suits other people. As far as I'm concerned, I've come to feel that Kencote is a precious sight nicer house to go to than a great many. It's different, and the others are all just the same. You've got to keep to the rules, but if you do you have a very good time. It's a pleasant rest."

"Oh, I know. I feel just the same as you about it. It reminds you of the days of your childhood, and your mother's knee, and all that sort of thing. Besides, they do you top-hole; I will say that. I'm old enough to appreciate it now; of course, five or six years ago I dare say I did think it a bit dull, and I may have shown it, though I never meant to rub your old Governor up the wrong way. Still, it will be quite different now. I'll teach in the Sunday school if he wants me to."

"If you go, you must observe strict punctuality as to meals, and you must do without games on Sunday, and bally-ragging generally. That's about all, and it isn't so very desperate."

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"Not a bit; and with your sister there it will be like heaven. Oh, you've got to get me asked, Humphrey."

"I'll do what I can. By the by, don't say a word about the Amberley business at Kencote. He doesn't like that mentioned."

"Doesn't he? Righto! It was the way your young sister showed up in that that clinched it with me. She was topping. Looked as pretty as a picture, and never let them rattle her once. They took her off the moment she'd given her evidence, and I never got the chance of a word with her. I've actually never seen her since, and that's a couple of months ago now. Well, here we are. I'm going to enjoy myself to-day."

Humphrey used his own discretion as to disclosing something of the state of his friend's affections when he and Susan went down to Kencote for Christmas.

"Look here, father, I've got something rather interesting to tell you. Bobby Trench—oh, I know you don't like him, but you'll find him much improved—wants to pay his addresses to Joan."

"What!" The Squire's expression was a mixture of disgust and incredulity.

"It would be a very good match for her. They've been chasing him for years. He'll come in for all that money of Lady Sophia's, you know, as well as everything else."

"Oh, a good match!" exclaimed the Squire impatiently. "I wouldn't have him about the place if he was the heir to a dukedom. And Joan is hardly more than a child. Time enough for all that in three or four

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years. And when the time comes I hope it will bring somebody as unlike Master Trench as possible."

Humphrey was rather dashed at this reception of his news. He was not quite so unaffected by Bobby Trench's place in the world and his prospective wealth as he had declared himself to be. To see one of his sisters married thus had struck him more and more as being desirable, and he had thought that his father would take much the same view, after a first expression of surprise and independence.

"I know he annoyed you when he came here before," he said. "I told him that, and said I wasn't surprised at it."

"Well, I'm not sorry you told him that. I should have told him so myself pretty plainly if he hadn't been a guest in my house. What had he got to say to it?"

"He said he was sorry he had offended you. But it was a good many years ago, and he was a fool in those days."

"He's a fool now," said the Squire. "When he came over here last summer, and let us in for all that infernal annoyance, which I shan't forgive him readily, he was just as impudent and superior as ever. A young cub like that—not that he's so very young now, but he's a cub all the same—seems to think that because a man chooses to live on his own property, and do his duty by the country, every smart gad-about with a handle to his name has got a right to look down upon him. There were Clintons at Kencote when *his* particular Trenches were pettifogging tradesmen in Yorkshire,

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and centuries before that. I don't deny that Sedbergh's title is a respectable one, as these things go nowadays, but to talk as if I ought to think myself honoured because a son of his wants to marry a daughter of mine is pure nonsense. Does Sedbergh know anything about this?"

"No. But Bobby says that he'll be as pleased as possible. He took a great fancy to Joan. He said she had been better brought up than any girl he knew."

"Yes, he told me that himself, and I dare say it's true. I've brought up my children to fear God and behave themselves properly. If he'd done the same, or his idiot of a wife, I don't know that I should have objected to the idea. But your 'Bobby' Trench isn't what his father was at his age, and not likely to be. I suppose he hasn't had the impudence to say anything to Joan yet?"

"Oh no. She doesn't know anything about it. In fact, he's not in the least sure about his chances with her. He only wants an opportunity of what I believe is called preferring his suit."

"Well, then, he won't get it. I don't care about the arrangement, and you can tell him so, if you like—from me."

With this the Squire strode out of the room, leaving Humphrey not so convinced that Bobby Trench would not be given his opportunity as might have seemed likely.

The Squire spoke to his wife about it. What nonsense was this about something between Joan and that

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young Trench? Surely a girl of Joan's age might be doing something better than giving encouragement to every crack-brained young fool to make free with her name! That's what came of letting her run about all over the place, and in all sorts of company, instead of keeping her quietly at home, as girls of that age ought to be kept. When the proper time came he should have no objection to seeing her suitably married. No doubt some nice young fellow would come forward, whom they could welcome into the family, just as Jim Graham had come forward for Cicely. In the meantime Joan had better be kept from making herself too cheap. She seemed to think she could do anything she liked, now that she had done with her governess. If he heard any more of it, the governess should come back, and Joan and Nancy should go into the schoolroom again.

Mrs. Clinton always had the advantage of time to think, when surprises of this sort were sprung upon her. When his speech came to an end she looked up at him and said, "I am sure that Joan has not done or said anything that you could blame her for, Edward. She does not like Mr. Trench. I do not like him either, and I know you don't. What is it you have heard?"

"Oh, I don't say that Joan is to blame. I don't know. No, I don't think she is. Sedbergh took to her, and said that she had been very well brought up. He told me that himself, and it is quite true. I've no fault to find with Joan in this respect. She and Nancy are good girls enough, though troublesome sometimes.

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They will grow out of that. She doesn't know anything about this, and I don't want it mentioned to her. Young Trench has been talking to Humphrey. He wants to come here and pay his addresses to Joan. That's what it comes to. I told Humphrey I wouldn't have it, and there's an end of it."

"I am glad of that, Edward. I don't think he would have any chance with Joan, and I should be sorry if it were otherwise."

"Well, as to that, Joan needn't be encouraged to think that she's got the whole world to pick and choose from. If this young Trench was the man his father was, it would be a very satisfactory arrangement. I don't deny that. He is the only son; and I shouldn't be entitled to expect a better marriage for a girl of mine, if position and money and all that sort of thing were everything."

"Oh, but they are not, are they?" said Mrs. Clinton. "They would not count at all if the man to whom they belonged were not what you could wish him to be."

"Well, I don't know that I should welcome a son-in-law who had no position and no money. I've a right to expect a daughter of mine to marry into the position in which she has been brought up. I wouldn't actually demand more than that. Cicely did it, and I was quite satisfied. Still, I shouldn't turn up my nose at a better match, and there's no doubt that this young Trench, if he were all right, would be an excellent match."

"But he is not, is he? You have always objected to him."

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"I can't say I know anything actually against him. I certainly shouldn't want to see more of him than I could help for my own sake. What is it *you* object to in him?"

"Much the same as you do, Edward. I dislike the sort of life he and those about him live. It is a different sort of life from that which we have encouraged any of our children to look forward to. I should be sorry to see Joan thrown into it."

"Oh, thrown into it! Nobody is going to throw her into it. I have said quite plainly that I don't like the idea. I may be old-fashioned—I dare say I am—but I'm not the sort of man to lose my head with pride because the heir to a peerage wants to marry my daughter."

Mrs. Clinton looked down and said nothing, but her heart was rather heavy.

"Joan hasn't said anything about him, has she? Nothing to show that she is aware that he—what shall I say—admires her?"

"She has made fun of him constantly," said Mrs. Clinton. "I am glad that you have refused to have Mr. Trench here. If he came, and paid court to her, I cannot believe that she would have anything to say to him. Nothing would come of it, except irritation and annoyance to you, and pain to me, and very possibly to Joan."

The Squire left her and took his news to Dick. "Your mother has taken a strong prejudice against him," he said. "As far as I'm aware he has never done

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anything to deserve it, but women are like that. They take an idea into their heads and nothing will get it out."

"Well, you've never shown any strong partiality for him yourself, that I know of," said Dick. "I don't care much about him, but he's a harmless sort of idiot. I always thought you were a bit rough on him."

"Did you? Well, perhaps I am. I must say that he did annoy me infernally when he came here before, and if he comes here again it will be on the distinct understanding that he follows the rules of the house and behaves himself. Kencote isn't Brummels, and never will be as long as I'm alive. That has got to be made quite plain."

"Do you want him to marry Joan, then?"

"Want it? No, I don't want it. Why should I want anything of the sort? I'm not in the position of having to say 'thank you' to the first man who comes along and wants to marry one of my daughters. They'll marry well enough when the time comes. Still, this young fellow is the son of one of my oldest friends, and I've never heard that there's actually anything against him; have you?"

"No more than what's on the surface. If he married Joan, I shouldn't want to live hand in glove with him."

"You wouldn't object to the marriage if it came about?"

Dick did not reply at once.

"It would be a good enough match from the worldly point of view," said the Squire.

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Dick looked up quickly. "I'm the wrong man to come to for that point of view," he said. "I didn't marry from it myself; nor did you."

The Squire digested this. "It's different for men," he said, with a shade of unwillingness. "You've got to take it into account with women."

"I'm not going to advise either one way or the other," said Dick. "If Joan likes that sort of fellow, she's welcome to him; if she doesn't, I shan't blame her."

"You think it's a matter for her to decide?"

"It isn't a matter for me to decide."

"She can't very well decide unless she sees him."

"Then let her see him, if you're satisfied with him yourself. He's not my fancy; but he may be hers, for all I can tell."

The Squire went back to his wife and told her that Dick didn't care for Bobby Trench any more than he did himself, but had never heard anything against him. He didn't see any reason against his seeing Joan. She could decide for herself. Nobody would bring any pressure to bear on her. That wasn't the way things were done in these days. But Lord Sedbergh was one of his oldest friends, and wouldn't like it if he heard that they had refused to have his son in the house. He shouldn't like it himself. Young Trench had better be asked to Kencote with the rest, for these balls that were coming on after Christmas. If he showed that he had anything in him, well and good. If not, he needn't be asked again, and no harm would be done.

"I will write to Mr. Trench," said Mrs. Clinton.

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"But I am sorry that you have decided to ask him here."

The Squire went away vaguely dissatisfied with himself, but took comfort in the thought that women didn't understand these things.

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CHAPTER II

JOAN AND NANCY

"My sweet old Joan, tell me all about it."

Joan buried her fair head in Virginia's skirts and burst into tears. She was sitting on the rug in front of the fire by Virginia's side, in the gloaming.

Virginia put her slim hand on to her shoulder, and caressed her lightly. "It's too bad," she said gently, with her soft, hardly distinguishable American intonation.

"I'm such a fool," said Joan. "I don't know what I want. I don't want anything."

She dried her eyes, but still kept her head on Virginia's knee, and put up her hand to give Virginia's a little squeeze. It was comforting to be with her, looking into the fire.

"It's about John Spence, isn't it, dear?" Virginia asked.

"I'm a fool," said Joan again. "I don't like him as much as I used to."

"Is that why you're a fool?" asked Virginia with a little laugh.

"No," said Joan seriously. "For caring about things changing, because one is grown up. I used to think it would be nothing but bliss to be grown up. Now I wish Nancy and I were little girls again. We

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used to be very happy together. We always talked about everything, it didn't matter what it was."

"And now you don't. You don't talk about John Spence."

Joan's tears flowed afresh. "I don't want to talk about it, Virginia," she said. "I am sure you would never understand what I feel. Whatever I said you would think I meant something else; and I don't a bit. I don't mind his liking Nancy best. I don't want him to like me more than he does."

"Oh, my darling girl! I think I understand it all better than you do yourself. You are unhappy, and you don't know why."

"Then tell me why."

"Well, to begin with, you are just a little jealous."

"Oh, Virginia! And you said you understood!"

"You are jealous, just as you would be if Dick were suddenly to show that he liked Nancy better than you."

"We used to have such fun together, all three of us. It never entered the heads of either of us to think which he liked the best. He liked us both just the same. Why couldn't it go on like that? I've done nothing. It was after I came back from that horrid Brummels. He didn't like my going there—not that it had anything to do with him. He was just like father about it, and tried to make out that it had altered me. It hadn't altered me at all. I was just the same as I had always been. It was he that had altered."

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"Can't you see, little girl, that it couldn't always go on as it used to?"

"Why not?"

"How can a man fall in love with two girls at once? He must choose one of them, or neither."

"I didn't want him to fall in love with me," said Joan quickly. "I am not in love with him. That's why it's so difficult to say anything. If I'm unhappy, it looks as if I must be."

"Not to me, dearest Joan. But you can be jealous about people without being in love with them. You know, darling, I think John Spence was almost bound to fall in love with one of you almost directly you grew up. I should have been very much surprised if he hadn't. But I could never tell which it would be. It was just as it happened to turn out. He came here when you were away, and that just turned the scale. After that it couldn't possibly be as it had been before, when you were both children; not even if you had behaved well about it."

"What!" exclaimed Joan, sitting up sharply.

Virginia smiled, and drew her back to her. "You haven't been kind to Nancy, you know," she said.

Joan did not resist her, but said rather stiffly, "It's she who hasn't been kind to me."

"How?"

"She has said nothing to me. I don't know even what she thinks about it all. If you say I am jealous, that is what I am jealous about. I don't even know that he *is* in love with her; and if he is, whether she

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knows it. She acts *exactly* as we always used to with him, and as I did, until I saw he didn't want me to."

"And then you became offended, and rather ostentatiously left them together whenever he came on the scene."

"Well, if he wanted Nancy, and didn't want me, I wasn't going to push myself forward."

"Poor John Spence!" said Virginia. "He is very disturbed about you. I think he *is* very much in love with Nancy. It has become plain even to my obtuse old Dick now. But he might so easily have been very much in love with you, instead, that it troubles his dear simple candid old soul to think you have so changed. As far as he is concerned, he would like nothing better than to be on the old terms with you. He wouldn't like you any the less because he likes Nancy more."

"It is Nancy I am thinking of," said Joan after a pause. "She always has been just a little hard, and she is hard without a doubt now. Fancy, Virginia—somebody being in love with her, and showing it, and her never saying one single word to me about it! Talking about anything else, but never about the only thing that she must be thinking about!"

"Don't you think she may be thinking you just a little hard? Fancy—somebody being in love with her, and showing it, and Joan not saying a word to her about it! Talking about anything else, but never the one thing!"

Joan put her handkerchief to her eyes. "If it hadn't begun as it did I should have done everything I could

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to please her," she said. "I should have been just as interested and perhaps excited about it, for her sake, as she could have been herself. She could have told me everything she was feeling, and now she tells me nothing. I suppose when he has proposed to her, if he does, she will tell me, just as she might tell me if anybody had asked her the time; and then she will ask me what I am going to wear. Oh, everything ought to be different between us just now."

"Yes, it ought," said Virginia. "Dear Joan, you and Nancy mustn't go on like this. I don't think Nancy is hard; I am sure she isn't in this case. She must be feeling it—not to be able to talk to you."

"If I thought that!"

"Darling, you know her so well—almost as well as you know yourself. Can't you see that it must be so? Can't you make it easy for her to talk to you? It would do away with your own unhappiness. It is that that you are really unhappy about. Life is changing all about you. You are a child no longer, and you have nothing to put in the place of what you are losing. You are feeling lonely, and out of it all. Isn't that it?"

"Yes, I suppose that is it. It used to be so jolly only a very short time ago—when Frank was home in the summer. Now Kencote doesn't seem like the same place. I should like to go away."

"You wouldn't feel the change so much if you and Nancy were what you have always been to each other.

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Joan dear, it is for you to take the first step. Show Nancy that you, of all people, are the most pleased at the happiness that is coming to her. I am quite sure she will respond."

Joan's tears came again. "I don't think she wants me now," she said. "She has somebody else, and I have nobody. At least, I have you—and mother. But Nancy and I have been almost like one person."

"She does want you, Joan. She *must* want you, just as much as you want her. But she won't say so unless you give her the chance."

"Dear old Nancy!" said Joan softly. "I have been rather a pig to her. But I won't be any more."

There was a long silence. Then Joan said, "There is something else, Virginia. Why has Bobby Trench been asked to come here to-morrow?"

Virginia laughed, after a momentary pause. "I expect he asked himself," she said. "Hasn't he shown himself to be a great admirer of yours, Joan?"

"Oh!" said Joan without a smile. "I have never shown myself to be a great admirer of his. Virginia, I can't understand it. I know mother wrote to him. I asked her why, and she said Humphrey had wanted him asked, and father had said that he might be. She didn't seem to want to talk about him, and I could see that she didn't like him, and was sorry to have to ask him. It is father I don't understand. He has almost foamed at the mouth whenever Bobby Trench's name has been mentioned, and you know what a frightful fuss he made when I went to Brummels, and when

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Bobby Trench came here about that Amberley affair. He said he shouldn't be let in if he came again."

"Well, my dear, you know what your father is. He could no more act inhospitably to anybody than——"

"Oh, Virginia, that's nonsense. He was quite rude to him when he came. Besides, it's a different thing altogether, *asking* him to come. He needn't have done that. Why did he do it?"

"Isn't Lord Sedbergh an old friend of his?"

"Virginia, I believe you are in the conspiracy against me. I *hate* Bobby Trench, and when he comes here I won't have a thing to say to him. If father wants him here, he can look after him himself. I couldn't believe it when it first came into my head; but father said something to me, after he had looked at me once or twice in an odd sort of way, almost as if I were a person he didn't know."

"What did he say to you?"

"Oh, something about *him*, I forget what now. And when I said what an idiot I thought he was, he was quite annoyed, and said I ought not to talk about people in that way. How *can* father be so changeable? He treats us as if nobody had any sense but himself, and lays down the law; and then, even in a question in which you agree with him, you find that all his sound and fury means nothing at all, and he has turned completely round."

"Well, my dear, we are not all the same. Your father speaks very strongly whatever is in his mind at the moment, and if he has cause to change his mind

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he is just as strong on the other side. It was so with me, you know well enough. He wouldn't hear a word in my favour; and now he likes me almost as much as Dick does. You have to dig down deeper than his speech to find what is fixed in him."

"I don't believe that anything is fixed. Anyone would have said that he had a *real* dislike to Brummels, and all that goes with it. I am sure he made fuss enough when I went there, and has gone on making it ever since; and Bobby Trench summed it all up for him. He wouldn't have this and he wouldn't have that; and Kencote, and the way we live here, was the only sort of life that anybody ought to live. Oh, *you* know it all by heart. And then, just as one is beginning to think there is something in it, and that we *have* been very happy living quietly here, one finds that *he*, of all people, wants something else."

"What does he want?"

"What does he want for *me?* Does he want Bobby Trench, Virginia? There! You don't say anything. You *are* in the conspiracy. I *won't.* Nothing will make me."

"My dear child, there is no conspiracy. And if there were, I shouldn't be in it. *I* don't want Bobby Trench for you; I want somebody much better. But I don't want anybody, yet awhile. I want to keep you."

"Doesn't mother want to keep me? Does *she* want Bobby Trench for me?"

"No, I am quite sure she doesn't."

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"Then what is it all about? Oh, I am very unhappy, Virginia. I want to talk it all over with Nancy; but I can't now. It is just as if everything were falling away from me. Nobody cares. A little time ago I should have gone to mother if I had hurt my finger. I feel all alone. Why does father want to bring Bobby Trench worrying me, of all the people in the world?"

"Dearest Joan, you are making too much of it. You talk as if you were going to be forced into something you don't like."

"That is just what I feel is happening. It isn't like Kencote; not like anything I have known. Oh, I wish I were a little girl again."

"My dear, put it like this; somebody is bound to want you, sooner or later. I suppose somebody wants you now. He moves mountains to get at you, and find out whether you want *him*. You don't, and that is all there is to say about it."

"It might be," said Joan, "if it weren't that father is one of the mountains. He is one that is very easily shifted. Oh, I'm not a child any longer. I do know something about the world. I do know quite well that if he were not who he is, father would not have him near the place. Money and rank—those are what he really cares about, though he pretends to despise them—in anybody else. What is the good of belonging to an old and proud family, as we do, if you can't be just a little prouder than the rest?"

"Well, my dear, as a product of a country where

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those things don't count for much, I am bound to say that I think it isn't much good. People are what their characters and surroundings make them."

"Father wouldn't say that. He would say that blood counted for a lot. I am quite sure he would say that people like us had a finer sense of honour than people who are nobodies by birth. I don't think he comes out of the test very well. I think if anything were to happen to him where his birth and his position couldn't help him, his honour wouldn't be finer than anybody else's. If he were to lose all his money, for instance—I think he would feel that more than anything in the world. He would be stripped of almost everything. No-one would know him."

"Oh, Joan darling, you mustn't say things like that. It isn't like you."

Poor Joan, her mind at unrest, her first glimpse of the world outside the sheltered garden of her childhood showing her only the chill loneliness of its battling crowds, was not in a mood to insist upon her discoveries.

"It does make me feel rather bitter," she said through her tears. "But I don't want to be."

As she and Nancy were dressing for dinner, she said lightly, but with a strained look in her eyes, "The conquering Bobby Trench will be here by this time to-morrow. Nancy, you are not to go leaving me alone with him."

Nancy looked up at her sharply, but her face was hidden, and she did not see the look in it, the look

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which hoped for a warm return to their old habit of discussing everything and everybody together.

"I suppose you would like me to take him off your hands so that you can devote yourself to John Spence?" she said.

If Joan was ready to mention names, she was ready too. Her meaning was not so unkind as her words; but how was Joan, ready to smart at a touch, to know that?

She could not speak for a moment. Then she said with a quiver, "I don't want to devote myself to him. He likes you best."

Nancy heard the quiver, and it moved her; but not enough to soothe the soreness she felt against Joan. Joan might be ready now, unwillingly, to accept the fact that John Spence liked Nancy best; but she had stood out against it for a long time, and had not taken the discovery in the way that Nancy was convinced she would have taken it herself, if Joan had been the preferred.

"If he does, it is your fault," she said. "I've not tried to make him. I have only been just the same as I always was; and you have been quite different."

There was nothing in this speech that would have struck Joan as unkind a few months before. But the tension was too great now to bear of the old outspokenness between them. How could Virginia say that Nancy wasn't hard? She only wanted to make friends, but Nancy wanted to quarrel. But she would not be hard in return.

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"Perhaps I have been rather a pig," she said. "I haven't meant to be; and I shan't be any more."

Nancy was conquered. The tears came into her own eyes. All that Virginia said of her was true. She had been aching for the old intimacy with Joan, more than ever now that such wonderful things were happening to her, and she had to keep them uncomfortably locked up in her own breast.

But Nancy would never cry if she could possibly stop herself. It was a point of honour with her, which Joan, with whom tears came more readily, had always understood. If they were to get back on to the old ground, signs of emotion on Joan's part would properly be met by a dry carelessness on hers.

"Well, you *have* been rather a pig," she said, ready to fall on Joan's neck, and give way to her own feelings without restraint, when the proprieties had once been observed. "But if you're not going to be any more, I'll forgive you."

Joan was too troubled to recognise this speech as a prelude to complete capitulation. She had gone as far as she could, and thought that Nancy was repulsing her. She now burst into open tears, into which wounded pride entered as much as wounded affection. "You're a beast," she cried, using the free language of their childhood. "I don't want you to forgive me. I've done nothing to be forgiven for. I only thought you might want to be friends again. But if you don't, I don't either. I shan't try again."

Nancy wavered for a moment. Then the memory of

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her own grievances rushed back upon her, and she shrugged her shoulders. "All right," she said. "If you're satisfied, I'm sure I am. I should have been quite ready to be friends, but it's impossible with you as you are now. I should leave off crying if I were you. You won't be fit to be seen."

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CHAPTER III

HUMPHREY AND SUSAN

HUMPHREY and Susan arrived at Kencote on a waft of good fortune. A widowed aunt of Susan's, a lady of unaccountable actions, from whom it had never been safe to expect anything, whether good or bad, had died and left her niece a "little place."

In the satisfaction induced by this acquisition, which seemed to endorse, almost supernaturally, his own oft-tendered advice, the Squire looked upon his daughter-in-law with new eyes. Her faults were forgotten; she was no longer, at best, a mere ornamental luxury of a wife, at worst a too expensive one; she had brought land into the family, or, at any rate—for there was very little land—property. She took her stand, in a small way, with those heiresses with whom the Clintons had from time to time allied themselves, not infrequently to the permanent enhancement of the rooted Kencote dignity, and occasionally to the swelling of one of the buds of the prolific Clinton tree into the proud state of a branch. This had happened, many generations before, in the case of the ancestor from whom Susan, a born Clinton, had herself sprung, and had helped to the nurture of that particular branch so effectively that its umbrage was more conspicuous than that of the parent stem itself.

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What Susan now brought would hardly have that effect. Looked at rigorously in the mouth, her gift-horse might even have received a cool welcome in some stables. There was the house, situated on the borders of the New Forest, charmingly enough, photographed as a pleasant, two-storied, creeper-decked villa suitable for the occupation of a lady of high rank and not more than adequate means. And there were gardens, paddocks, and a few acres of half-tamed forest, not more than twenty or five and twenty in all. There were also the contents of the house, faded carpets, crowded knick-knacks, Berlin wool-work, theological library, crayon drawings, and all. But there was no money. That had been left to old servants, to "Societies," and to the support of otherwise homeless cats and dogs, whose sad friendless state this old lady had had much at heart.

"It will want a great deal of doing up," Lady Susan said. "The papers are too hideous for words, there's no sign of a bathroom, and the outbuildings are tumbling to pieces."

Nevertheless she seemed to be in high spirits over her legacy, and the Squire, shutting his eyes to the state of the wallpapers and the outbuildings, and remembering only the acreage, congratulated her, and himself, warmly on the heritage.

"My dear girl," he said, "it is a great piece of luck. You *are* lucky, you know, you and Humphrey. He could never have expected the life interest of practically the whole of old Aunt Laura's money, and now this has

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come just to point out the way in which you ought to enjoy your good fortune. The place produces nothing—well, that can't he helped. At any rate you live rent free, with your foot on your own little piece of ground; and you throw over all that nonsense which by this time I should think you're getting heartily sick and tired of."

There was hint of interrogation in the tone of the last sentence, and it was responded to in a way to bring the Squire into still closer approving accord with his daughter-in-law.

"Oh yes. We are both tired of it. We are going to get rid of the flat directly Denny Croft is ready for us. I am going to turn into a regular countrywoman. I shall wear thick boots, and keep chickens. We are going to economise too. We shall only keep three horses and a pony. And Humphrey says he shall drink a great deal of beer. We are going to like ourselves tremendously in the country."

The Squire told Mrs. Clinton that nothing had pleased him better for a long time than the way Susan was taking up with the idea of country life. "It is the best thing in the world," he said. "It has made a different woman of her already. She is brighter and steadier at the same time. It proves what I have always said, that that London life, if you go on living it year after year, is simply another name for boredom. Who would have thought a year or two ago that Susan would have been satisfied with anything else? Yet here she is, overjoyed at the idea of escaping from it.

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Nina, I can't help thinking that the finger of Providence is to be seen here. The property is nothing much, after all—just a little bit of land to give them a hold on things. But if it hadn't come, I doubt if they would have made the change. I think we ought to be very thankful that things are ordered for us in the way they are."

Humphrey, accepting Dick's congratulations on Susan's legacy, expressed himself moderately satisfied. "It's not going to make millionaires of us," he said. "In fact, it will be a pretty tight squeeze to get the place made habitable. The old lady might have left something to go with it, instead of muddling away everything quite uselessly as she did. It would have made all the difference to us. Still, it has shoved us into making the change, and I'm glad of it."

"I should think you would be able to amuse yourself there all right," said Dick. "You'll save three hundred a year over your rent, for one thing. But I don't know—if you get into the way of going up to London constantly, you'll soon mop that up."

"Oh, I know. I'm not going to. I don't say we're going to bury ourselves there entirely, but we shall stick to it pretty well. And when we do go up to town we can put up with Susan's people, or somewhere."

"Yes. If you'll take a word of warning, it's quite possible you may find it a bit slow after the novelty has worn off. I don't myself, because I've got what amounts to a job here. But you won't have; and you were always keener on town pleasures than I was.

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You'll have to watch it a bit after the first month or two."

"Oh, my dear fellow, I've got all that in my mind. One has to do one or the other; one can't do both; or, at least, most of us can't. I tell you, I've had a sickener of the other. It isn't good enough. This will be a change, and I want a change."

More seemed to be coming, and Dick waited for it to come, after saying rather perfunctorily, "Susan seems to like the idea too."

"I'm glad to say she does," said Humphrey; "more than I should have thought she would. Of course, she's excited at having the place left to her, and she's going to have no end of fun over rigging it up. I shall have to be careful how I go, there. It's a new toy; and my experience is that new toys are apt to run you into a lot of money. Still, I've warned her about that, and told her that when we go to Denny Croft we stop there; and she says she doesn't want anything better. I tell you, it's a weight off my mind to find her ready to take a sensible view of things."

Still Dick waited for more.

"We *ought* to have been able to do all right," said Humphrey, after a slight pause. "I don't like giving up London, and that's a fact. I can amuse myself in the country all right, couldn't do without it altogether—I'm not a born townsman, like some fellows—but I prefer it to go to, not to live in. But I'm ready to do anything and go anywhere, to get rid of the beastly burden of things. That's why I welcome the change."

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"You won't find it such an unpleasant change."

"As things are, it will be the greatest relief. And yet other people manage to get on, and do everything we have done, on less than we have."

"Well, you've neither of you got what you might call a passion for economy."

"I believe I'm getting it," said Humphrey with a laugh. "I've begun to keep accounts. When I looked into things a year or two ago, and the Governor squared us up, I told Susan that it mustn't happen again. I made estimates and got her to agree with them."

"It is the only way, if you want to know what you're spending. I do it as a matter of principle. Besides, you get more for your money. The difficulty is to keep to your estimates, I suppose, if you've been spending too much."

"I've kept to mine—the personal ones, I mean. But I don't know how it is—Susan doesn't seem to be able to."

"Well, then, you've got to make her," said Dick firmly. He had no love for his sister-in-law, and was prepared to resist on his father's behalf the further demands which he thought he saw coming. "After all, it's mostly your money, and it's for you to say how it shall be spent."

Humphrey, understanding quite well the source of this decisive speech, flushed. "I'm not in debt," he said shortly.

"Oh!" Dick was rather taken aback.

"I suppose when you've once played the fool, every-

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body you talk to about money thinks you must be trying to get something out of them. I believe the Governor has an idea in his head that I'm coming to him shortly with another tale of woe. If you get an opportunity, you might disabuse his mind of it. I don't say I don't owe a bill or two, but they are nothing to count."

"I'm sorry if I misunderstood you. I've had some experience of keeping within limits, and if I can lend you a hand over getting your house put into order without wasting money, I shall be glad to do so. In fact, if you want a hundred or two towards it, I dare say I can manage to let you have it. Pleased to."

"Thanks, Dick, it's awfully good of you." Humphrey was moved by this offer. Dick was generous with money, but knew its value. An offer of this sort from him meant more than was betokened by the matter-of-fact tone in which it was made. "As a loan, it might help me over a corner, for I've nothing in hand. But I shall keep things down for a year or two, and take the cost of doing up the place into account."

"Right you are, old chap. We'll go into it, and I'll let you know what I can do."

"Thanks. It will make things a good deal easier. I'm a reformed character. I hate not seeing my way, now."

The phrase struck Dick agreeably. It was what, with his cool robust sense, he regarded as the one thing necessary, if life was to be ordered on a satisfactory basis. He would have had no anxiety about money if

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his own income had been cut down to a pittance. He would have done without anything rather than forestall it by a week. He had expressed himself freely about Humphrey's insane blindness, as it seemed to him, in this respect; but now he seemed to have learnt his lesson, and Dick's feelings warmed towards him.

"How has it gone wrong?" he asked, with more interest than he had shown hitherto.

"It hasn't gone particularly wrong, lately. But we never seem to have a bob in hand; and it has meant doing without every sort of thing that one used to have as a matter of course."

"Oh, come now! Only the two of you! You ought not to have to go without much."

"I can only tell you that I've come to thinking twice before I take a taxi, and I've given up smoking cigars. It has to begin somewhere; but nothing seems to make any difference. Susan's housekeeping! But what can I do? I put it at so much; I asked people about it, and they said it was ample. But she seems to want double as much as anybody else for whatever she does. She says it *must* cost more because we chucked dining at restaurants, except occasionally. *I* don't know what it is. Money simply flows away in London, and you get nothing for it. I chucked a couple of clubs at the beginning of this year. Seems to me I've got to chuck everything if I'm to keep straight. And that's just what I'm going to do. It's been easier since we went up to Northamptonshire, although even there you'd think we inhabited a mansion by the housekeeping bills,

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instead of a little dog's hole of a place just big enough to hold us. Still, the main expense there is outside, and I've got that in hand."

"She must spend a tremendous lot on clothes."

"Well, to do her justice, she's clever at that, and I haven't had any trouble with her beastly dressmakers and milliners since that time two years ago. They were the devil then, of course. She has got hold of some cheap woman who turns her out extraordinarily well for very little. I wish she'd tackle other things as she does that. No, I'm not going to put all the blame on Susan. I really believe she's doing her best; but she doesn't seem to have it in her, except about her clothes. Anyhow, she's ready to do anything, and it shows that she's as worried about what has gone on, in her way, as I am, that she's so keen to go and live at Denny Croft. She's going to garden, and all the rest of it, and she swears she'll keep to half her dress allowance and put the rest into doing up the house."

"That's the way to go about it," said Dick. "She certainly does seem much keener on it than I should have thought she would have been. Virginia says so too. Let's hope it will last."

"It's going to," said Humphrey. "I'll see to that."

Dick told Virginia something of the conversation between himself and Humphrey, and what he had offered to do for him.

"Oh, Dick!" she cried, "make him a present of it. You must have lots laid by. We haven't been spending nearly up to our income."

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"It's what I meant," he said, smiling at her quick generosity. "But I don't think I will—not until later."

"Oh, why not? I can spare it, if you can't."

"I can spare it. But it won't do him any harm to save a bit. When he offers to pay me back, I shall tell him he can keep it. Go a bust with it, if he likes. He's tackling the situation well. I'm pleased about it. He does like his London pleasures, and he's quite ready to give them up."

"So is Susan, isn't she? She seems a different creature. As if a load were lifted off her mind."

"I'm not so sure about Susan. My idea is that Humphrey will have to keep her to it. It will give him something to do. The trouble with him is that he has always been at a loose end. All the rest of us have got our jobs. It will be his job to keep his expenditure down, and look after Susan. I've always thought she was a rotter, and I don't trust her simply because, as Humphrey says himself, she's got a new toy to play with."

"Oh, I think she means it. I like her better than I did. She sees her faults. Nobody who can do that is worthless. I'm sure she is not worthless."

Dick pinched her chin between his thumb and forefinger. He was still in love with this slim sweet candid creature, whose great eyes were lustrous with the flame of her eager spirit. "Nobody is worthless in your eyes," he said. "You could even find excuses for Rachel Amberley."

A shadow fell across her bright face. "Poor

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woman!" she said. "Oh, poor, poor woman! Here we are, all of us together, happy at Christmas-time; and she——! Oh, Dick—'for all prisoners and captives'! I thought of her in church this morning. The loneliness—the cold! I think we ought to pray to be forgiven, as well as she."

Dick kissed her gently. "You don't want to think too much about her," he said. "She's paying the price."

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CHAPTER IV

COMING HOME FROM THE BALL

"This is where we are going to shoot to-morrow. We've kept this side entirely until now. We ought to do pretty well."

Bobby Trench, muffled up to the cigar he was smoking, sat by the side of Dick, who was driving the big omnibus back from the West Meadshire Hunt Ball. The two fine horses, making nothing of the load behind them, trotted rhythmically homewards. Heavy rain had ceased, and the moon peeping through scudding clouds shone on pools of water lying on the muddy road. The yellow lamp-rays tinged the wide strips of turf bordering the roadway, and lit up successive tree trunks, posted sentinel-like, behind the oak fences.

Bobby Trench had chosen to sit outside, with Dick and Frank. His evening had been disappointing. He had arrived at Kencote in time for dinner, prepared to make himself pleasant all round, which he seemed to have succeeded in doing to everybody except Joan, who had held somewhat coldly aloof, although he had kept strictly to his predetermined plan of treating her with cool friendliness until the ball should give him opportunities of carefully graded tenderness. But the ball had given him no opportunities, or none that Joan would allow him to take advantage of. She had snubbed

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him, had shown herself, indeed, determined to find occasions for snubbing him; for he was agile in skipping out of the way of such occasions, but she had pursued his skippings and dealt her strokes in spite of them. She had primly refused him more than two dances, and had refused to go in to supper with him. His anticipated pleasure having thus resolved itself into puzzled pain, Bobby Trench had declared himself for tobacco and the night air, and left Joan to her reflections inside, barbing them, as he handed her in, with a careless example of his own peculiar humour, which was founded on the basis of a cheery and always ready loquacity.

Snubs, or attempted snubs, received with no diminution of self-assurance or good-temper, at both of which they may be supposed to be aimed, are apt to recoil on those who administer them; and Joan, taking refuge between the comforting skirts of Virginia and Miss Dexter, was already reproaching herself for her treatment of one who had given her no cause for it except his presence, and whose persistent cheerfulness under persecution was a shining lesson to ill-temper. She was feeling miserable enough, in all conscience, and need not have beaten down the last sparks of enjoyment that she might have gained from the bright movement, hitherto eagerly anticipated, by setting herself to a task so little productive of satisfaction.

But she did not occupy her thoughts for long with Bobby Trench. She made up her mind that, having shown him that particular attention from him would

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not be welcome, she might safely return to the chaffing intimacy which had hitherto been the note of their intercourse, and had been quite as efficacious in keeping him at the requisite distance as her recent manner. And having so decided she dismissed him from her mind and wrapped herself round with her unhappiness.

It was dreadful to be going home from a ball, not only with no retrospective pleasure, but with nothing to look forward to in the way of disrobing talk. She and Nancy, since her wrecked attempt at reconciliation, had carried their respective heads in the air, and had hardly spoken to one another, except in the presence of their handmaid, for the purpose of averting comment. And yet she knew that Nancy's happy fate was marching upon her, and reproached herself a thousand times for her inability to cross the gulf between them, and share her sister's doubts and sweet tremors. John Spence had danced with her three times—many times with Nancy—and his manner had been brotherly-kind and protecting, as if to soothe her soreness, which yet he did not seem to have divined. His thoughts had not been much with her, that had been plain—but his quietness and simplicity had comforted her a little, and she had not wanted to talk. She had taken refuge in a plea of headache, and held to it on the homeward drive.

Nobody seemed to want to talk. Something had gone wrong with the lamp inside the carriage, and they were in darkness, except for the faint irradiation of the moon. Mrs. Clinton had driven home earlier, with Sir George and Lady Senhouse and Muriel Clinton,

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Walter's wife. In the absence of Bobby Trench, the eight of them inside the omnibus were of such family intimacy that there was no necessity for conversation, if private thoughts sufficed, or snatches of slumber. John Spence, the one exception, had no great initiative in conversation at any time, and in the far corner beside Nancy much preferred the silent, ruminative progression through the dark country roads and lanes. Greatly daring, he advanced his large muscular hand under the warm fur billowing down the carriage, and sought for Nancy's. He found it and gave it a squeeze. She returned the squeeze and withdrew her hand. A year before, such a sign of appreciative affection might very well have come from her—or from Joan—instead of from him. Perhaps her ready acceptance of it might mean no more than that her affectionate appreciation was still of the same quality. But the chance of its meaning something more thrilled his big frame, and on it his thoughts fed sweetly in the dark silence.

Virginia was right. He was head over ears in love with Nancy, but he shrank from telling her so. He was years older than she, almost as old as Dick, almost an old bachelor, except that at heart he had kept his simple youthfulness; and his great body, hardened and kept fine by field-sports, was still as responsive to his mind as that of a youth in his glorious twenties. But modesty was a great part of him, and he could not envisage himself as a man likely to gain prizes usually reserved for gallant youth. The fresh, laughing friendliness of the twins, when he had first known them as girls

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of fifteen, had attracted him delightfully, and he had been surprised to find that the attraction had changed its quality; also, at first, a little incredulous. It was only when he discovered that he thrilled to Nancy's touch and voice, and not to Joan's, that he accepted his fate; and, ever since, he had been tormented with doubts as to whether an avowal of his new feeling would bring him a response, or only destroy the frank confidence with which he still loved to be treated. The poor man sometimes imagined Nancy regarding him in the light of a fun-producing uncle, and felt that it would be sacrilege to her innocence to reveal himself as a lover. If he risked all, he might lose all, and be for ever disgraced in her eyes. He trembled, in his more darksome moods, at the thought. But love was urging him on. The time would soon come when the avuncular character would be more difficult to support than that of a rejected absentee.

Dick pulled up his horses at a gate opening on to a broad grass ride between the trees. A groom got down from behind and opened it.

"We cut off nearly a mile and a half here," Dick said. "But I'm afraid it will be rather soft going after this rain. We'll chance it. There's only one place where we might get stuck."

The horses broke gently into a slow trot, their hoofs and the iron-shod wheels of the heavy carriage making no sound on the thick grass. They went down a long and very easy slope, and then Dick pulled them to a walk through soft ground in the cup of the almost

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indistinguishable hollow. With a tightening of traces and no more than the stroke of a whip-lash they pulled the omnibus through, leaving sharp ruts behind it, and were once more on springy turf. Just as they were about to quicken into a trot again, Bobby Trench seized Dick's arm. "What's that!" he cried. "Did you hear it?"

"Somebody shouted," said Frank, standing up behind them; and had no sooner spoken when the silence of the woods was sharply broken by a gun-shot.

"Poachers, by Jove!" said Dick. "We shall catch them." He drove quickly on towards the point from which the report had come.

Suddenly there were shouts of men, and another report from a gun; then more shouting, and the cracking of trampled twigs quite near to them.

"The keepers are out. Good boys!" cried Dick, in excitement, reining in his horses.

Frank and Bobby Trench were down and off into the covert. Humphrey, who had been sitting next to the door, had followed them. Dick was for doing the same, but paused irresolute when he had called a groom to take the reins, and swung himself down from his seat. There was a commotion inside the omnibus. The women must be thought of.

Walter stood at the door, calming them. John Spence was on his feet ready to push out, but Nancy had hold of his hand, and Susan Clinton was clinging to him terrified. "All right, I'll stay, but I must get out," he said, torn between his desire to be in the fray,

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and the appeal, not of Susan's frightened cries, but of Nancy's silent call for protection.

"If you two will stay here, I'll go and see what's happening," said Dick. "It's all right, Virginia; there can't be many of them, and the men are there."

Another shot rang out above the sounds, hard by, of an angry struggle, and was followed by a cry of pain. Dick began to run towards the sound.

The moon now shining brightly made his progress easy. He saw three or four men, locked in a fierce struggle, and thought he recognised Frank as one of them. Then a cry to his right brought him round to see another group in combat. Someone was lying prone on the grass. A few yards from the still figure two others were reeling to and fro, and as he approached went down. The one underneath was wrapped in a long coat, the uppermost was unhampered, a giant figure of a man as he seemed, with a gun in his hands, on the barrels of which a shaft of moonlight glinted. He looked to be striking at the head of the other figure, and a cry for help rose up, urgently.

Dick sprang forward, but caught his foot on a root and fell. As he picked himself up, another figure ran past him with a raised cudgel.

"All right, sir, coming!"

The thick stick went down resoundingly on the ruffian's head, who let go of the gun-barrels, and turned with his arm raised to guard himself.

Dick had him by the neck, and was screwing his knuckles into the throat. He gulped, put hands like

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vices on to his sleeves, and kicked with a great iron-shod boot. Dick felt his shin peel through his thin trousers, but no pain. In a moment the keeper had thrown himself on to him, he ceased to struggle, and, Dick's fists relaxing their hold, choked out submission. "All right, you got me. You can give over now."

Humphrey rose from the ground, white and shaking, the blood trickling from a wound over his eyebrow. "The brute!" he said. "He'd have killed me. Lucky you came along. Where's Bobby?"

Bobby Trench lay on the dark ground, motionless, his arm stretched at a peculiar angle. As they bent over him, he fluttered an eyelid, then opened both. "Winged me," he said in a faint voice. "Ugh!" Then fainted again.

"He shot at him," said Humphrey. "I was just behind. He got it in the shoulder. Look here; all torn; he'll bleed to death."

Dick set up a shout. The wood was still now of the louder clamour. The mimic battle was over.

Gotch, the keeper, had secured their captive with a rope. He took it calmly, even good-humouredly. "'Aven't done for 'im, 'ave I, Governor?" he called out.

"Hold your tongue, you swine!" said Gotch, hitting him on the mouth, at which he expostulated mildly, as at an unreasonable act. "All right, mate; you got me. It's a lifer if I done for him. I on'y wanted to know."

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CHAPTER V

ROBERT RECUMBENT

Bobby Trench, lying in bed, the seams of his pyjama jacket cut and ribboned at the left arm and shoulder to accommodate the bandages, was an interesting figure. He had gone through his time of fever and fiery pain, his probings and dressings; now, but for occasional discomfort, and a languorous but convalescent weakness, he was himself again, and prepared to take up his affairs at the point at which they had been interrupted by what had befallen him.

The nurse, moving capably about the large, airy, chintz-bedecked room, in her trim livery, was besieged for news of the household. Tall, handsome, and still young, she was on very good terms with her patient. Regarded as a "case," he did her credit; and she couldn't help liking him, as she wrote to her relations.

"Look here, Sarah Gamp, you're a deceitful woman. You're keeping them all away from me; you know you are. I'm as fit as a fiddle, or shall be in about five minutes; and I want to see company."

The nurse permitted herself a smile. "You're to be kept quiet for a day or two. Doctor's orders."

"Doctor's orders! Walter Clinton! What sort of a Bob Sawyer is he, to give orders? You know much

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more about things than he does, don't you now? You want to keep me to yourself, that's what it is."

"Indeed, you're very ungrateful. Dr. Clinton is a rising man in the profession. There isn't a doctor in London could have done better for you."

"You think so, Mrs. Gamp?"

"Yes, I do. It was lucky for you that he was there when you were shot."

"Yes, that was a piece of luck, wasn't it? He had a busy night of it. I say, who has been asking for me?"

"Oh, everybody, of course. You will have plenty of visitors when you are well enough to receive them."

"I'm well enough now. You're trying to keep me to yourself, Sarah. There's a sort of fatal fascination about me that no good-looking woman can resist? I say, do the doctors make love to you in the hospital?"

"I think you are getting light-headed. You have talked quite enough for the present. Would you like some jelly?"

"I should like some strawberries and cream and a pint of champagne. Look here, tell me about the doctors. Are there any good-looking fellows amongst them?"

The conversation was interrupted at this point by the arrival of Walter Clinton, whose knickerbockered homespuns only served to heighten the effect of his cool professional manner.

"Well, nurse, how's your patient?"

"Going on well, doctor; but you must please tell

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him that he must keep quiet for the present. He wants to see everybody in the house."

Walter took his seat by the bed and felt his patient's pulse. "You can see people to-morrow," he said, as he pocketed his watch. "You're doing all right. Better have one more day to yourself, though. You've had a narrow squeak."

"I know. Mrs. Gamp says that if it hadn't been for you, I should have snuffed out. She revels in gore. I don't think she's the woman for her job."

"Don't you believe what he says, doctor. He's full of his nonsense."

"How's Humphrey?" asked Bobby.

"Oh, he's all right. He got off with a scalp wound. Poor old Dick had his shin laid bare. I've got him on my hands. But we're well out of it. That was a brute of a fellow. And there were two others; tough customers, all of them. If we hadn't come along they might have got the better of our fellows. They've quodded them. The Governor went over to Petty Sessions to-day. By the by, he'd like to see you when you're ready."

"I'm ready now. Ask him to step up."

"To-morrow—if you get a good night."

"What are they all doing downstairs?"

"Slacking, and playing with my kiddies. They all sent messages to you."

"They must have got a pretty good shock. You turned them out of the bus, didn't you? I don't remember much of what happened."

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"Yes, but I'd sent one of the grooms on to get some more carriages. They didn't have to wait long. They're all right. Joan got a bit of a chill, and is seedy."

"I suppose she was—upset about it all? Pretty funking to see a fellow brought along in the state I was in!"

"Oh, they all took it very well. Susan was the worst, but of course Humphrey looked worse than he really was—luckily."

Bobby Trench, an incurable optimist, allowed himself the solace of imagining that Joan's indisposition had been brought on by her agitation on his account, which it well might have been without undue partiality on her part. For after waiting for minutes that had seemed like hours, while the fight was going on in the wood, and being forsaken by Walter, who had left them in answer to Dick's shouts for help, they had been turned out of the omnibus, so that the bleeding, senseless figure of Bobby Trench might be laid there for Walter to examine and bind up. Humphrey had also needed attention, and Susan had been frightened almost into hysterics by his appearance. They had walked for half a mile in satin shoes, mostly over grass wringing wet, until the carriages from Kencote had picked them up; and after the fatigue of the ball and in her state of low spirits, it was small wonder that Joan should have succumbed to her experiences.

But her indisposition had caused some lessening of the tension between herself and Nancy, who, possibly

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supported by the tender attentions of John Spence, had escaped all ill effect from the excitements of the night. Their differences were ignored. There had been no real reconciliation, but the events in which they had participated had formed a skin over the wounds that each had dealt the other, and they could behave with some approach to former freedom.

Bobby Trench's first unofficial visitor was the Squire, as was only fitting. Mrs. Clinton had been with him constantly until the arrival of the nurse, but he had then been delirious, and had not known her, and she had not entered his room since.

The Squire came in, bringing with him a breath of the now frosty outer air, but treading Agag-like on complimentary slippers.

"Well, sir," was his hearty greeting, tuned to suitable lowness of pitch, "this is a pretty business to have brought you into! Lucky it wasn't worse, eh? I told them on the Bench to-day that you were the first in the field. There were many enquiries after you; and we've got those blackguards safely by the leg. You've got everything you want, I hope. Nurse looking after you well?"

"You wouldn't think it to look at her, but she's a bully, Mr. Clinton. If you get ill you send for somebody else."

The Squire, after a glance at the nurse's demurely smiling face, checked a laugh at the witticism. "Keep up your spirits," he said. "That's capital. You'll soon be out of the wood if you take it cheerfully. We

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shall make a lot of you when you come downstairs. You did well; and I've written to tell your father so."

Bobby Trench felt that a few torn muscles and splintered bones were a small price to pay for this approving geniality. On his arrival, the Squire seemed to have swung back from the acquiescent mood in which he had caused his former aversion to be invited to Kencote, and had greeted him with a manner not much more conciliatory than he had previously shown him. Bobby Trench, on reflection, had attributed his invitation to Humphrey's having imparted as much of his confidence as would secure it; and, in view of his acknowledged eligibility, had expected a rather warmer welcome than he had received, either from his host or hostess. It had seemed to him that he would have other obstacles to surmount, in order to win Joan, than those which she might be inclined to put between herself and him of her own accord. It was therefore gratifying to find the face of his host thus turned towards him, and would have been worth a substantial reduction in the sentence to be presently passed upon his assailant, if he had had the computing of his punishment.

"I must write a line to my father," he said. "I'm glad you've written to him. He doesn't suggest coming here, I suppose?"

"Well, yes, he does. We shall be pleased to see him—and her ladyship too, if she cares about it."

"Oh, save us from her ladyship!" said Bobby, unfilially. "She'd be hopeless in a sick-room; and this

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is a real keep-your-distance, Sundays-only sick-room, ain't it, Sarah Gamp?"

"Mr. Trench must be kept as quiet as possible," said the nurse; and the Squire, with an unintentionally obvious lift of spirits, said that he did not gather that Lady Sedbergh was anything but content to leave her son in present hands. "I've said we are looking after you as well as we can," he said. "You'll have plenty of company when you're well enough to receive it. Humphrey wants to have a look at you later on. If you hadn't been so sharp at the start, I expect he would have come in for what you got. He'd have been pretty well knocked out as it was, if it hadn't been for that young fellow, Gotch, and Dick. It's the first time anything of this sort has happened at Kencote since my grandfather's time. I don't say we haven't had to teach our local sportsmen a lesson or two occasionally, but these were regular professional ruffians from a distance—Ganton they come from—and that class of gentry sticks at nothing when he's interfered with. You see we've done very well with our young birds this year, and they must have got wind of the fact that we'd kept those coverts. That's why they turned their kind attentions on to us. They've been all round about, but mostly on more fully stocked places than mine generally is, and they've never been nabbed. Fortunately my keeper had an idea that they might pay us a visit, and had all his watchers out there. Otherwise you might have come upon them driving home, and then I don't know what would have happened. It's provi-

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dential all round—the keepers being there, and you coming just in the nick of time to reinforce them. We're rid of a dangerous pest; and no particular harm is done—except to you, I'm afraid. I don't want to make light of that."

But if the Squire did not, Bobby Trench was not unwilling to do so, now that the worst was over. He saw himself an interesting, not to say petted, figure, with a perhaps undeserved but none the less convenient aura of heroism, and hoped accordingly.

"You must have got a bit of a shock when you first heard of it," he said. "I suppose that was when the ladies came in."

"I was waiting for them," said the Squire on a note of detailed reminiscence. "They had knocked me up and told me that the groom had come in for carriages, and I had had him in and learnt what he could tell me. I should have gone myself, but thought it better to stay and direct any preparations that had to be made. I didn't know but what there might have been serious accidents, and it turned out I was right. My wife had the idea too; but women are apt to lose their heads in these emergencies, so I stayed to see that everything was got ready. I went down into the cellar myself for a bottle of my oldest brandy. You want to keep a cool head on these occasions."

"The ladies were pretty much upset, eh?"

"Oh, I soon stopped their fuss. 'Look here, *you're* not hurt,' I said. 'You'd better all swallow something hot, and then tuck yourselves up in your blankets,'

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I packed them all off, except Virginia and Miss Dexter—oh, and Susan, who wouldn't go till she'd seen Humphrey safe; and Nancy was helping her mother; she's turning into a useful girl, that—didn't turn a hair."

"Then Miss Joan was the only one who went up?"

"Yes, she was upset—hasn't quite the head that Nancy has. She's in bed now, but there's nothing really the matter with her. We're over it all very well, and ought to be thankful for it. Depend upon it, there's a Providence that looks after these things; and I say we're not doing our duty unless we recognise it, and show that we have some sense of gratitude. Sure you've got everything you want here?"

He looked round the large comfortable room with an air of complacent proprietorship. He kept habitually to half-a-dozen rooms of the big house, and had no such feeling for it and its hoarded contents as would impel some men and most women to occasional tours of inspection and appraisal. But it was all his, and it was all as it should be. He had not put foot inside this room perhaps for years, and took it in with a pleased feeling of proprietorship and recognition.

"Oh, every mortal thing, thanks," said Bobby. "It's a jolly room, this; cheery and peaceful at the same time. Just the room to be laid up in, if you've got to be laid up."

"My grandfather died in this room," said the Squire, by way of adding to its impression of cheerfulness. "Had it before *his* father died and never would shift downstairs. It was done up later, but I see there are

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one or two of his pictures still on the walls. This was his wardrobe, too. A good piece of mahogany; they don't make furniture so solid now-a-days."

He had got up to examine one or two of the old sporting prints on the walls, which he did with informative comment. "Most of the furniture is the same," he said, now looking round him from the vantage point of the hearthrug, where he seemed more spaciously at his ease than sitting in a chair by the bedside. "Yes, they only papered it, and put a new carpet and curtains. He wouldn't have curtains at all; liked to see the sun rise, and wasn't much behind it himself as a rule. He was a fine old fellow. Have you read his diaries?"

"Yes, I have," said Bobby, stretching the truth not unduly, for the two volumes of Colonel Clinton of Kencote's record of his lifelong pursuit of fur and feathers were in every adequately furnished country house library, and had been at least dipped into by countless sportsmen. "Jolly interesting! We don't take things so seriously now-a-days. Good thing if we did. A book like that shows you that half the things we do aren't nearly as amusing as sticking at home in the country and looking about you."

The Squire warmed to him. "That's a very sensible thing to say. The nonsense people talk about the country being dull! Dull! It's the people that say it who are dull. They've got no resources in themselves. Now my grandfather—you can see what he knew about nature by his diaries. But that wasn't his only interest by any means. He had an electrical apparatus, when

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they weren't nearly as common as they are now. He read books—stiff books, some of them. He was a man of brains as well as muscle, and in the life he chose to lead he had time and opportunity for exercising his brains. Oh, I say that the country life is the best life, undoubtedly. And I go further, and say that those who have a stake in the country—own land, and so forth—are doing a criminal thing if they don't spend a good part of their lives on their properties, instead of spending the money they get from them elsewhere."

"I quite agree with you," said Bobby Trench, anxious to fix the good impression he had made, and also to put a point to these observations. "Have your fling for a year or two when you're young, and then marry and settle down. You don't want to tie yourself by the leg, especially if you have a certain place in the world—House of Lords—Committees—all that sort of thing. But make your *home* in the country, I say. Bring up your children in pure air—fresh milk, and all that. You know, Mr. Clinton, a house like Kencote makes you think how jolly a simple country life may be made for everybody concerned. Early to bed, early to rise, church on Sundays, good food and drink, something to shoot, and all that sort of thing, and your family and relations coming down to liven you up—oh, it's life, that's what it is. All the rest is footle, compared with it."

A Daniel come to judgment! Saul among the prophets! Never had the shining example of Kencote,

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where wealth and ancestry adorned but did not overpower a God-fearing simplicity of life, received a more effective testimonial. Forgotten were Bobby Trench's offences against its ordered ways, withdrawn the Squire's strictures on his manners and character. He had found salvation. Kencote—and its owner—had triumphed exceedingly.

But Bobby Trench's speech, while offering most acceptable incense, had brought to mind the object with which he had installed himself at Kencote. This the Squire had, for the time, completely forgotten, and was not yet ready to exercise his mind upon it. So with a "Well, I mustn't make you talk too much," he took his leave, promising to come again shortly, and in the meantime to send other visitors.

These did not, on the first day of Bobby Trench's convalescence, include any of the ladies of the house; but, on the day after, Mrs. Clinton, urged by the Squire, paid him a visit.

Bobby Trench could make no headway with her. She was solicitous as to his welfare, ready to talk in an unembarrassed and even friendly fashion; but kept him, beneath her ostensible approach, so at arm's length that when she left him he had not found it possible to ask, as he had meant to do, that Joan or Nancy—he was prepared to blunt the point of his request by including Nancy—might pay him a visit. And what Bobby Trench did not find it possible to ask of anybody was not likely to come about of itself. For further female society he had to be content with that of Susan Clinton,

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who, on already intimate terms with him, promised to do what she could to make things "easy all round."

This she essayed to do by hymning his courage at the call of danger, patience in affliction, and amiability under all weathers; but found none to take up her praises, except Humphrey, to a politic degree of indifference, and the Squire, who admitted that he had been mistaken in that young fellow, and had found him with a head on his shoulders, and a very proper idea as to what he should do with his place in the world when he should succeed to it.

This positive praise, after a long course of unmeasured abuse, only seemed to Joan, listening to it dispiritedly, a flick of the lash to start her on the road along which she conceived her father wishing to drive her, and caused her, if the ungallant simile may be carried out, to set her feet the more obstinately against it. It had much the same effect upon Mrs. Clinton, who foresaw herself plied with an enlargement on this theme, and forced either to obey, or else openly resist, directions founded upon it. Susan's intervention had only affected the already converted, except to insubordination, and would have been better omitted.

But what lover can eschew the use of weapons so ready to hand as the good nature of uninterested parties, or gauge their dangerous futility? Only in the case of the adored object being predisposed to adore is intentionally distilled praise treated without suspicion, and likely to achieve its object; which in that case is already achieved.

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CHAPTER VI

JOAN REBELLIOUS

JOAN, more or less recovered from her indisposition, still looked upon the world as a place from which all happiness had for ever fled. She mooned about the house doing nothing, and only felt that youth had not altogether departed from her when she was with her mother, who, in her calm stability, was a refuge from the buffetings of life, but seemed to be holding aloof from the troubles she must have known her girl to be undergoing.

Dick had gone up to Yorkshire to shoot with John Spence, and taken Virginia and Nancy with him. The invitation had been extended to Joan; but the Squire had said, with what she felt to be treacherous affection, "Surely, you're not *both* going to desert your old father!" and she had refused; partly because she had dreaded lest acceptance should bring down upon her a direct prohibition, and the obliquity of a parent, whom she still wished to respect if she could, would stand revealed in all its nakedness; partly because Nancy had given her no encouragement, and as things were between them, it would be a relief to be apart for a time. Her mother had said nothing to influence her either way.

Walter had taken his wife and children back to London, leaving Bobby Trench in the care of the local

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surgeon. Frank had gone back to Greenwich, where he was taking a course. Humphrey and Susan were paying a flying visit to Hampshire, to arrange about the work to be done at Denny Croft. But there would be a mild recrudescence of Christmas gaieties in a week's time, when there was to be another ball, for which most of the party would reassemble.

Joan was sitting in the schoolroom, feeling very low and miserable, and wondering what was coming of it all, when she was surprised by the entrance of her father, who visited this quarter of the house at intervals so rare as to have permitted it to assume the character of a retreat.

"Well, my girl," he said paternally. "The house seems so empty that I thought I'd come up for a little chat."

It was the hour when Mrs. Clinton visited her recumbent guest, leaving the nurse free for an airing. Joan had occasionally accompanied her in her walks, but found them too apt to be filled with talk about her patient, couched in such laudatory language that Joan suspected the patient of having taken her into his confidence. In justice to him it must be said that the suspicion was unfounded, and in justice to the nurse that she had eyesight not less acute than the rest of her sex.

There were times when Joan felt drawn to put her head on her father's broad shoulder, and receive the protective petting which in his milder moods he was as capable of administering as the most consistently doting

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of parents. This would have been one of those times if it had been possible to regard him as the solace as well as the occasion of her trouble. But enough of the impulse remained to cause her to welcome him with a sense of forgiveness, and to make room for him by her side on the broad sofa.

He would have done well to respond to the movement, but, instead, he took up his attitude of harangue in front of her, with his back to the fire, and cleared his throat. She saw what was coming, and stiffened.

"Well, we shall have our invalid downstairs to-morrow," he made his clumsy opening. "Wonderful recovery! 'Pon my word I'm beginning to think that we shall see Walter a medical knight and I don't know what all, before we're much older."

"I dare say it wasn't so bad, after all, as it was thought to be," said Joan. "Men make such a fuss about a little pain. Women bear it much better."

This speech caused the Squire to bend his brows upon her, traversing as it did all the traditions in which she had been brought up as to the relative values of the sexes, and challenging that prompt verbal chastisement with which precocious rebellion must be dealt with, if those values were to be preserved in his own household. But Joan's eyes were downcast, and he took warning, without perceiving its source, from a certain angle between the lines of her neck and her back, not to pursue a by-path which would draw him—might indeed have been opened up to draw him—from the road he had sought her out to pursue.

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"Well, that's as may be," he said, dismissing the offence; "but the pain has been borne well enough by this particular man; and if a charge of shot at such close quarters that it lays bare the bone and splinters it isn't pretty serious, I don't know what is. Walter told me that he would never be able to raise that arm above his shoulder again, however well it might heal."

Joan shuddered at the staring picture, and felt herself convicted of brutal callousness.

"However," proceeded her father, who might advantageously have left an interval for his words to make their effect, "the worst is over now, and we ought to do what we can to cheer him up and help him to forget it. It's been pretty dull for him, lying there, mostly alone. Your mother has seen fit to object for some reason or other to your paying him a visit in his room, though I think those ideas can be carried too far, and there couldn't be any harm in it, especially as he's now on the sofa."

Then her mother *was* on her side, although she had said nothing to her. Joan perceived quite plainly that her father had asked that she might be taken to see Bobby Trench, and her mother had refused, as she sometimes did refuse the requests of her lord and master, but only if she considered them quite beyond reason. Joan was drawn to one parent, and all the more set against the other.

"I don't like Mr. Trench," she said. "I shouldn't have gone to see him, even if mother had said I might; unless she had said that I must."

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"Well, she wouldn't be likely to say that, if you didn't want to," said the Squire, determined to keep the interview on a note of mild reasonableness, in spite of provocation. "But now, I should like to know *why* you have taken a dislike to young Trench. I saw nothing of it when he was here before."

"You told me, after he had come here in the summer, that I had been making too free with him, and that you didn't want me to have anything to do with young cubs like that; and that if I wasn't careful how I behaved I should find myself back in the schoolroom with Miss Phipp."

The Squire had an uneasy feeling that he had given his younger daughters too much rope, and should have to bring them up with a round turn one of these days. But this was not the occasion.

"Well, I remember I did say something of the sort," he said. "I was upset by that Amberley business, and I've never gone back from the view I took then that if you had behaved sensibly you need never have been brought into it at all."

"How could I have helped it, father?"

"How could you have helped it? Why—— But I don't want to go into all that again. It's over and done with, thank God, and we can put it out of our minds."

"I'm sure I don't want to talk about it. But it's rather hard to know what to do, when you scold me for having anything to do with Mr. Trench one day, and want to know why I won't have anything to do with him the next."

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It was probably at this moment that the Squire realised that his daughter was grown up. She spoke to him as his sons were accustomed to speak, with an offhand air of equality, to which, in them, he did not object. It was not, however, fitting in his eyes that he should be thus addressed by Joan, and he turned aside from his purpose to say, "I'm sure you don't mean to be impertinent, but that's not the way to speak to your father. Besides—one day and the next day! That's nonsense, you know. It must be over six months since I said whatever it was I did say, and you were a good deal younger then."

"I was six months younger—that's all."

"Well, six months is six months; and a good deal can happen in six months. I've nothing to regret in what I said six months ago, except that I may have said it rather more strongly than I need have done, annoyed as I was."

"Then you don't think that Mr. Trench was really a young cub, after all?"

"I wish you wouldn't keep on repeating those words. They are not words for you to say, whatever *I* may say. But if you ask me a plain question, and put it properly, I don't mind telling you that I was to a certain extent mistaken in young Trench. He has a way with him, on the surface, that I didn't care about, though I don't know that it means anything more than that he has naturally high spirits, which are not a bad thing to have when you are young."

"But he isn't so very young. He must be at least

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thirty-five. *I* think his way is a very silly way, and he is quite old enough to know better."

It was a choice of repeating her words, "*You* think!" and going on to explain with strong irritability that it didn't matter what she thought; or swallowing the offence. For he could not very well follow his inclination to upbraid, without seriously impairing his efficacy for reasoning with her. He chose the latter course.

"A man of thirty-five *is* a young man in these days, especially if he has led an active, temperate, open-air life, as young fellows in good circumstances do lead now-a-days."

"But I thought one of your objections to him was that he lived too much in London."

He waved the interruption aside. "Even people who live for the most part in London—work there, perhaps—well, like Walter does—have a taste for country life, and go in for sport and so forth whenever they have the opportunity. In the old days it wasn't so. There was a story of some big political wig—I forget who it was—Fox or Walpole or Pitt, or one of those fellows—who had the front of his country house paved with cobble stones, and made them drive carriages about half the night whenever he had to be there, so as to make him think he was in St. James's, with the hackney-coaches. Said he couldn't sleep otherwise. Ha, ha!"

"What a good idea!" said Joan, brightening to an opportunity of diverting the conversation. "I think

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stories about people in the eighteenth century are awfully interesting. Father, you have books of reminiscences about them in the library, haven't you?"

"Oh yes. Your great grandfather used to read them. He knew Fox; saw him come into the Cocoa-Tree one night and call for a bumper of—— However, that's not what we were talking about. But it's got this much to do with it, that men like Fox were looked upon as middle-aged men at five and thirty, and old men, by George, at fifty; but a man of thirty-five now is a young man, and it's all owing to the revival of country life and country sport, which, as I say, everybody who is anybody takes part in now-a-days, whether he's a Londoner or not."

"Yes, I see. But I like the people who live regularly in the country, like you, and Dick, and Jim. I think it's much the best life for a man, and a girl too. I should like to live it always, myself."

"Yes, well, I hope you will—for a good part of the year, at any rate. Of course, you can't expect to live at home—here at Kencote, I mean—all your life. You're grown up, now, and when young fledglings feel their wings, you know, the parent birds must make up their minds to lose them out of the nest."

"But they would like to keep them if they could. You don't want to lose me, father, do you?"

She looked up at him for the first time, and he was checked in the march of his desires. A doubt came to him whether he did want her to leave the nest just yet awhile. It was so very short a time since he had

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looked upon her and Nancy as still children, hardly longer, indeed, as it seemed, since they had made their somewhat disconcerting arrival, and from being a laughable addition to his family, of which he had been the least little bit ashamed, had found their way to his heart, and sensibly heightened the already strong attraction of his home. If Nancy was about to leave him, as to his great surprise he had recently heard was likely to happen, and to take just the kind of husband whom he had always desired for his daughters, could he not make up his mind to forego for a few years the advantages held out to Joan, who had always been a little closer to the centre of his heart? Was it so very important that she should marry a man of rank, if he took the form of Bobby Trench, when there were men like John Spence—good, honest, well-born, wealthy country gentlemen, men after his own heart—who were ready to come forward in due time?

These questions presented themselves to him in the form of an uneasy feeling that he might find himself obliged to change his course, if he should consider them carefully. He therefore shut his mind to them as quickly as possible; for there is nothing a hasty obstinate character dislikes more than to be compelled to prove himself in the wrong. When others try to prove him in the wrong, he can stand up to them.

"My dear child," he said, "of course I don't want to lose you. But when one is getting on in years, you know—not that I'm an old man—hope to have many years in front of me yet, please God—one doesn't live

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only in the present. You look forward into the future, and you like to see your children married and settled down before the time comes when you must get ready to go. And now we've got on to the subject of marrying and settling down, I just want to say a word to you which you mustn't misunderstand, or think I'm trying in any way to influence you, which is the very last thing I should wish to do—but as a father one is bound to put these matters in a light—not the most important light perhaps, but still one that a young girl can hardly be expected to take much into consideration herself—it wouldn't be advisable that she should. In short—well, now we *are* on the subject—this very young man—young Trench, whom we've been discussing, as it turns out—er—— This is what I want to say to you—that I've reason to believe that—er—there's a certain young lady—ha! ha! that *he'd* like to marry and settle down with, and—er——"

"But wasn't that exactly what you came upstairs to say to me, father?" asked Joan, with innocent open eyes, inwardly girding herself to contempt against this transparent duplicity, and hardening herself to make it as uncomfortable as possible for him to say what he had to say, even to the point of exhibiting herself as almost immodestly experienced.

He stared at her. "What!" he exclaimed. "You have had it in your mind all along?"

"You put it there, father," she retorted. "I'm grown up now. I've got eyes in my head. I knew there must be *some* reason for your making mother ask

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him here, when she dislikes him just as much as I do, and after you had always said that *you* disliked him just as much, or more."

He gulped down oceans of displeasure and inclination to rebuke. "Now look here," he said. "Let's have no more harping on that string, and no more silly and undutiful speeches. You say you are grown-up. Very well, then, you can listen to sense; and you can talk sense if you wish it. I've already said that young Trench displeased me when he stayed here before; and, as you keep on reminding me, I said so at the time pretty plainly. It's my custom to speak plainly, and I've nothing to regret in that. If he acted in the same way now, I should object just as strongly. But the whole point is that he would *not* act in the same way now. It is not I that have changed; it is he. Perhaps you're right, to a certain extent, in saying that he was old enough to know better. But a young fellow in his position is apt to keep on sowing his wild oats when others who have to begin to take a serious view of life more early have left off doing it. Anyhow, he has left off doing it now. He told me himself, and I was gratified to hear it, that seeing how life went in a house like this turned him round to see that he had been playing the fool. There's nothing wrong with him at bottom, any more than there is anything wrong with Humphrey, who played the fool in much the same way for years after he ought to have done, but has come to see you can't go on playing the fool all your life, and is now quite ready to settle down in a sensible

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way. You'll find when you come to talk to young Trench—when he comes down to-morrow—that——"

"I'm not going to talk to him," Joan interrupted. "I don't like him."

Well, really! Was it possible to talk sensibly to women at all? Would the clearest logic and reason weigh a grain against their obstinate likes and dislikes? Was it worth while going on?

"Are you going to listen to what I have to say, or not?" he asked impatiently. "Or do you want to be——?"

"Sent to bed?" Joan took him up. "Yes, father, I think you had better send me to bed. I know I'm being a very naughty girl, but you won't make me like Mr. Trench, however long you talk."

"You *are* naughty. You are laying yourself out to annoy me. There is no question of my *making* you like Mr. Trench, and you know that as well as I do. I am simply asking you to behave with ordinary courtesy to a visitor in my house, who has been seriously hurt in coming to the rescue of my own men—and in the pluckiest way too, and might very well have been killed. Is that too much to expect my own daughter to do, I should like to know, or——?"

"Oh no, father. Of course I shall be polite. I didn't know that was all you wanted."

"Yes, it *is* all I want. You are taking up a most extraordinary and unwarrantable position. Anyone would think, to hear you talk, that I had come up here to order you to marry young Trench out of hand.

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You see how outrageous it sounds when you put it plainly."

"Yes, I know it does; but I thought it was what you meant."

"Well, then, it is *not* what I meant, or anything like it. I'm the last man in the world who would put any pressure on his daughters to marry anybody; and when no word of marriage has been mentioned it seems to me indelicate in the highest degree for a girl as young as you to be turning it over and discussing it in the open way you do. It's what comes of letting you gad about here and there and everywhere, amongst all sorts of people; and I tell you I won't have it."

Joan was enchanted. His leg was over the back of his favourite horse now, and she only had to give it a flick in the flank to set it galloping off with him.

"But, father dear, I haven't been gadding about. It is six months and more since I went to Brummels; and I'm sure I never want to go there again, after all you said about it, and the people I met there."

He reined in. The course was too difficult. "You're in a very tiresome and obstinate mood," he said, "and I don't like it. I come up here to spend a quiet half-hour with you, and you do nothing but set yourself to annoy me. But there's one thing I insist upon; I won't have you making yourself disagreeable to a guest in my house. When young Trench comes downstairs to-morrow, it's our common duty to cheer him up and try to make up to him for all he has gone through on our account. And you have got to do your share of it,

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and Nancy too, when she comes home. Now do you quite understand that?"

"Oh yes, father," said Joan. "I quite understand that."

"Very well, then. Mind you do it."

With which words the Squire left the room with an air of victory.

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CHAPTER VII

DISAPPOINTMENTS

JOAN was so far fortified by her conversation with her father that she was quite prepared to play her part in entertaining Bobby Trench when he exchanged the sofa in his bedroom for one in the morning-room.

She had proved to herself that there was little to fear. Her own weapons had been effective in turning aside any that had been brought, or could be brought, against her. Her mother, although she had not spoken, was on her side, her father had been routed and was sulking. No one else was likely to assail her, unless it was Bobby Trench himself; and him alone she had never feared.

She was even well-disposed towards him, and ready to amuse herself in the momentary dulness of the house, as well as him, by playing games, and forgetting, as far as was possible, in his spirited society, the troubles that beset her.

She was, to tell the truth, not unsympathetically shocked at his appearance when she first gave him greeting. Although his speech was as fluent and lively as ever, his face was pale and thin, and there was no ignoring the seriousness of his bound-up wound. But he took it all so lightly that some sense of the ready pluck he had shown came home to her, and abated her preju-

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dice against him, which, indeed, had hardly existed until he had been presented to her mind as an encouraged wooer.

As for him, his enforced absence from her society, while yet he knew that she was under the same roof, had set him thinking about her with ever-increasing desire; and to find her, in her fresh young beauty, not holding him at arm's length, as she had done on the night of the ball, but smiling and friendly—this was to bind the cords of love till more tightly around him, and cause him most sweet discomfort in keeping them hidden.

And yet, by the time the house filled again, he could not congratulate himself on having made any progress with her. She would laugh with him and at him, and keep him agreeable company for an hour or two hours together, during which time their intimacy appeared to be founded on a complete and happy community of taste; but at a word or hint of love-making she would freeze, and if it was persisted in, she would leave him.

The poor man was in torments, underneath his gay exterior. If her behaviour had been designed to draw him on and enmesh him completely, it could not have been more effective. She was merry with him, because now she liked him, as a diversion from her lonely, sad-coloured thoughts. She could forget her estrangement from Nancy when she was playing with him, and the overcasting of her long-familiar life; and she felt so confident of being able to hold him in his place that the

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designs she knew him to be cherishing no longer troubled her at all.

But how was he to escape the perpetual hope that her obvious increase of liking for him was developing into something warmer than mere liking? And how was he to avoid now and then putting that hope to the test, seeing her so frank and so sweetly desirable? He was always cast down to the ground when he did so. Love had not blunted his native acuteness, and there was no mistaking the state of rising aversion in which she met and parried his tentative advances. In that only was she different from what she had been; for, before, she had parried them with a demure mischievousness, which had shown her taking enjoyment in the exercise of her wits. Now she used other weapons, and made it plain that her friendliness would not stand the strain, if she was to be put to those contests.

And yet liking and love cannot be kept in separate compartments in such circumstances as these. Liking, if it grows big enough, becomes love some day or other. He knew that, and she didn't; which was why he put very strong constraint on himself, made few mistakes in the way of premature soundings, and set himself diligently to be the indispensable companion of her days. The underlying contest, viewed from without, would have been seen to turn upon the question of his possessing qualities which would satisfy the deeper currents of her nature. Gaiety and courage he had, and self-control, if he cared to exercise it. Some amount of goodwill towards the world at large, also; but that was

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apt to hang upon the satisfaction or otherwise that he received from it. It was likely to come out at its strongest in his present condition of mind, and to throw into shadow his innate triviality.

It always seemed to Joan that he showed up least attractively in the presence of her mother, and this although he seemed more anxious to please her than he did to please Joan herself.

Bobby Trench could never have said that Mrs. Clinton was not giving him his chance. She never came into the room as if she wished to keep guard, nor turned a disapproving face upon the merriment that he made with Joan. She would respond to his sallies, and her smile was free, if it was aroused at all.

He thought that he had taken her measure. She was at heart a serious woman, and on that account she could not be expected to take very readily to him, for he hated seriousness, and it was out of his power to disguise it. But she was a nonentity in this house: he had heard her husband speak to her. The Squire was warmly in his favour, for reasons which were too obvious to need stating, and those reasons might be expected to appeal equally to Mrs. Clinton, who would also follow her husband's lead in everything. He did think that it was owing to her that Joan had been prevented from visiting him upstairs, for the Squire had given him that hint, without intending to do so. But he put that down to her old-fashioned prudery, and had forgiven her for it, since she now seemed quite willing to leave Joan alone with him. She might practically be disregarded

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as far as effective opposition was concerned; but it would be as well to keep on her right side, for Joan was evidently very fond of her, and by commending himself to her he would commend himself to Joan.

None but a shallow brain could have judged of Mrs. Clinton as a nonentity, when opportunities for observing her were such as Bobby Trench enjoyed. The very fact that when she was present his humour seemed even to him to wear thin, and the conversation always followed the paths into which she directed it, might have warned him of that error. The paths she chose were not such as he could disport himself in to any advantage, although she trod them naturally enough, and Joan followed her as if she liked taking them.

Ideas make the best talk, someone has said, then things, then people. Bobby Trench could talk about people all day and all night if he were to be called upon; his experience had been wide, he had a fund of anecdote, and a quick eye for a point. To talk well about "things," you want reading and knowledge, of which he had little. To talk well about ideas, you want some of your own, and he had but few. He heard Joan, to his surprise, venturing herself with interest on subjects to which he had never given a moment's thought, and on which his readily produced speeches were like those of a child pushing into and spoiling the converse of its elders. Joan would sometimes look at him in surprise, as if he had said something particularly foolish, when he was not aware of having done so. He felt at a disadvantage.

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He could not see that the question of woman's suffrage, which he started himself, was not satisfactorily covered by funny stories about the suffragettes, and thought Mrs. Clinton a bore for going on with it. She asked him about plays which he had seen and of which she had read, and he told her about actors and actresses. Of books he knew nothing. They were not much talked about at Kencote, but Mrs. Clinton read a good deal, and so did Joan and Nancy, and talked between themselves of what they read. It was impossible to keep allusion altogether out of their talk, although they spared him as much as possible, having been trained to do so in the similar case of the Squire, whose broad view of literature was that as nobody had written better than Shakespeare, it was waste of time to read anything else until you had thoroughly mastered *him*, in which modest feat, however, he had not himself made any startling progress. But Bobby Trench, otherwise quite at ease as to his ignorance on such negligible matters, felt that it would have been to his benefit with Mrs. Clinton, and possibly with Joan, if he could have done with rather less explanation of points that were readily appreciated by either of them.

And yet no intellectual demands would have been made of a man like John Spence that would have shown him to disadvantage if he had not been able to meet them. His simple modesty would have fared better than Bobby Trench's superficial smartness, because he would never have tried to shine, and, failing, made a parade of his

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ignorance. He would have been tried by other tests, and come through them.

It was by these other tests that Bobby Trench stood or fell with Mrs. Clinton, not by his lack of intellectual interests.

What did he ask of life for himself?

A good time.

How did he stand with regard to the wealth and position which were the unacknowledged cause of his being where he was? Were they to be held as opportunities?

Yes, for giving him a good time.

What had he to bestow on others?

Luncheons, dinners, suppers, boxes at theatres, motor trips, yachting trips—all the material for a good time—on his equals; money tips, drinks, an occasional patronising cigar, on such of his inferiors as served or pleased him, so that he might imagine them also to be having a good time, according to their degree.

What did he demand from those of whom he made his friends?

Assistance in the great aim of having a good time, which cannot be enjoyed alone. Nothing beyond that; no steadfastness in friendship, no character; only the power to amuse or to share amusement.

That was Bobby Trench, as he revealed himself from day to day to the woman whom he treated with almost patronising attention, and considered a nonentity. Whether he so revealed himself to Joan there was nothing yet to show; but it was unlikely that she would have so clear a vision, or indeed that a good time, if he could

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persuade her that it was in his power to offer it, would not appeal to her, at her age, as of more importance than her mother could have desired.

Joan scanned Nancy's face on her return home for signs of relenting, and of a story completed. Neither appeared. Nancy kissed her lightly, and said, "We've had an awfully cold journey." Joan's heart sank again.

"How did you enjoy yourself?" she asked.

"Oh, awfully. It is a splendid great house, bigger than this, and much older. There were a lot of people staying there. We danced in the ball-room every night, and had great fun. Dick's leg is pretty well right now, though he had to shoot from a pony. How is Mr. Trench?"

The bald sentences marked the gulf that had opened between them. And there had not been a word of John Spence.

He dined at Kencote that night. Joan saw how much in love he was with Nancy; and indeed it was plain to everybody. The Squire was in the highest state of good humour. He had had no more trouble with Joan, and no longer sulked with her, having frequently made a third or fourth in the society of the morning-room, and judged everything to be going on there as he would have had it. And now there was this other affair, going also exactly as he would have it. He felt that Providence was busily at work on his behalf, and showed that it had the welfare of the landed interest, in a general sort of way, at heart.

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The landed interest, though, had to keep a look-out on its own account, if those responsible were to be properly treated by the rank and file partly concerned in its continuance. There was a slight set-back the next morning, which the Squire took more to heart than seemed warranted.

The under-keeper, Gotch, who had come to Humphrey's rescue in the wood, and behaved well in the affair generally, had been thanked, and told that some substantial recognition of his merits would be considered, and in due course certainly made.

The Squire now had the satisfaction of being able to see his way to a more handsome reward than he had at first thought of, or than was, indeed, called for in the case of a man who had merely acted well in the course of his duty. But he prided himself on taking an interest in the welfare of all his servants; he was accustomed to say that he was not like those who treated them as machines; and he was genuinely pleased that circumstances brought it about that he could do Gotch a very good turn, also at the prospect of telling him so.

Gotch came to see him, on summons, in his business room. He was a fine specimen of country-bred manhood, about thirty years of age, upright and clean of limb, with a resourceful look on his open, weather-tanned face, and speech quiet, but readier and more direct than is usual with men of his class. He stood in his well-kept velveteens, cap in hand before his master, and looked him in the face when he addressed him.

"Well, Gotch," said the Squire, taking up his usual

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position in front of the fire. "I hear you've been making love, what?"

"Yes, sir," said Gotch, dropping his eyes for a moment.

"Clark, eh? Lady Susan Clinton's maid. Well, she seems a very respectable young woman, from what I've seen of her, and her ladyship tells me she's saved a bit of money, which is satisfactory, what? And I dare say you've saved a bit yourself."

"Yes, sir."

"When do you want to get married?"

The question was asked with business-like curtness, and was answered as shortly. "Soon as possible, sir."

"Yes. Well now, I've been turning things over in my mind, Gotch. I told you that I should do something for you, to mark my appreciation of the way you behaved in the affair with those scoundrels in Buckle Wood. In one way, you only did your duty, as anybody in my employ is expected to do it; but that's not the way I look at things. Those who do well by me—I like to do well by them; and there's not much doubt that if you hadn't—or somebody hadn't—hit that ruffian on the head—and just at the moment you did, too, by George—it might have gone very hard for Mr. Humphrey. I don't like to think of what would have happened."

"Thank you, sir," said Gotch, as there came a pause in the flow of eloquence.

"Very well, then. You want to get married. In the ordinary way you couldn't just yet, because there isn't

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a cottage. Now, Gotch, I'll build you a cottage. I've been talking it over with Captain Clinton, and we've decided to do that. There's a site in Buckle Wood about a hundred yards in from the gate on the Bathgate Road that'll be the very thing. I dare say you know the place I mean—that clearing hard by the brook. You shall have a good six-roomed house and a nice bit of garden and so forth, and everything that you can want for bringing up a family. Ha! ha! must look forward a bit, you know, in these matters. And there you'll be till the time comes when—well, I won't make any promises, and Rattray isn't an old man yet—but when he comes to the end of his time, if you go on as you've begun, you take his place as head-keeper. And let me tell you that head-keeper on a place like Kencote is about as good a job as any man has a right to look forward to. You'll follow some good men—men that have been written about in books, amongst them—and I believe you'll fill the place as well as any of them. You've got that to look forward to, Gotch, and in the meantime you'll be very nearly as well off as Rattray. In fact, your house will be a better house than his. We did think of moving him there and putting you into his cottage, but decided not. Now what have you got to say, Gotch? Will that meet your views?"

Gotch turned his cap in his hands. "Well, sir," he said. "I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you and Captain Clinton too. It's a handsome return for what I done, and kindly thought of."

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"Well, we think kindly of you, Gotch," said the Squire. "I hope we think kindly of all the people on the place, and do what we can for their happiness. But we owe you something special, and it's right that we should *do* something special."

It was not, in fact, anything remarkably self-sacrificing that the Squire intended to do. There was a dearth of cottages at Kencote, as there is on so many otherwise well-managed country estates. Young people who wished to marry were sometimes prevented from doing so for years, and there were cases of overcrowding in existing cottages, which, while not amounting to a scandal, might possibly be worked up into one by hostile critics. A new medical officer of health, residing outside the sphere of the Squire's social influence, and more than suspected of Radical tendencies, had caused notices to be served during the past year; and, worse than that, a London journalist spending his holidays at a farmhouse just outside the manor of Kencote had poked his nose in where he had no business to take it, and written a very one-sided article on the depopulation of rural England, with Kencote and its owner as a text. The Squire had been greatly scandalised, and would have rushed instantly into print had not Dick's cooler head restrained him. Unfair and ill-informed as both of them judged the article to be, there was enough truth in it to give the enemy a handle. There *was* overcrowding, though not to any serious extent; and there *was* a dearth of cottage accommodation.

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"Much better build a few, and stop their mouths," said Dick.

"It doesn't pay to build cottages," said the Squire. "It can't pay, with these ridiculous bye-laws."

"Can't be helped," said Dick. "We can afford to make this property a model one up to a point, and we'd much better take the bone out of their mouths. It isn't a very big one. It will only cost us a few hundreds to satisfy everybody. And they'll like our doing it less than anything. Besides, we've got to do something. That fellow Moxon has a wife and five children sleeping in two rooms, and that sort of thing simply doesn't do now-a-days."

The Squire looked at him suspiciously. "I think Virginia has been putting some of her American notions into your head," he said. "It did well enough in my grandfather's time, and he was much ahead of his time in that sort of thing. He built model cottages before anybody, almost, and Kencote has always been considered——"

"Oh, well, we needn't go into all that," interrupted Dick. "Moxon has been served with a notice, and if we don't do something for him we shall lose him. Let's be ahead of *our* time. There hasn't been a brick laid on the place for fifty years or more, except at the home farm and the stables here. It won't do any harm to improve the property in that way, and we've got the money in hand. We might begin with another keeper's cottage. We ought to have somebody in Buckle Wood."

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And that was how it all came to fit in so nicely with the reward due to Gotch, turning his cap round in his hands in front of his master.

"Well, sir," said Gotch, "if I was thinking of keeping to what I've been doing—and comfortable enough at it under you and Captain Clinton—for the rest of my life, nothing wouldn't have suited me better, and I take leave to thank you for it. But as you was so good as to say you was going to do something substantial for me, me and 'er talked it over, and we were going to ask you if you'd help us to get over to Canada, to start farming. She's got a brother there what's doing well, and I'd look to do as well as him if I could get a fair start."

The Squire heard him out, but his heavy brows came together, and by the end of the speech had met in a frown of displeasure. One of the points made by the London journalist had been that the best blood and muscle of the countryside was being drafted overseas, because by the selfishness of landowners there was no room for them in rural England; and here was a man for whom room was being made in the most generous manner, who wished to join in the altogether unnecessary stampede.

"Canada!" he echoed impatiently. "I think you fellows think that the soil is made of gold in Canada. What do *you*, of all people, want to go dancing off to Canada for? You're not a practical farmer, and even if you were there'd be better chances for you in the old country than in all the Canadas in the world."

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"Well, you know more about these things than I do, sir," said Gotch respectfully. "And I don't say as I should want to go if it was all in the air like. But there's 'er brother's offer open to me. He'll put me into the way of doing as well as he done himself, if I can take a bit of money out with me. He's a well-to-do man, and he wasn't no better than me when he went over there ten years ago."

"Well, and ain't I giving you the offer of being a well-to-do man, without pulling up stakes and starting again in a new country? What more can a man want than to have a good home and situation secured to him, on which he can marry and bring up a family, and work that he's fitted for and likes? You do like your work, don't you?"

"Yes, sir, I should like it better than anything, if——"

"If what?"

"Well, I hope you won't take it amiss what I says, sir; but every man what's worth anything likes to be his own master, sir. It don't mean that he's any complaint to make of them as he serves; and I haven't no complaint—far otherwise. I've done my best by you, sir, and knowed as I should get credit for it, and be well treated, as I 'ave been most handsome, by your kind offer. But it isn't just what I want, sir, and I make bold to say so, hoping not to be misunderstood."

"Oh, you're not misunderstood," said the Squire, unsoftened by this straightforward speech. "The fact is that you've got some pestilent socialistic notion in

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your head that I'm very sorry to see there. I didn't think it of you, Gotch, and I don't like it. I don't like it at all. It's ungrateful."

"I'm sure I shouldn't wish to be that, sir."

"But you are that. Don't you see that you are? A master has his duty towards those under him, and in my case I'm going out of my way to do more than my duty to you. But a man has his duty towards his master too. That's what seems to be forgotten now-a-days. It's all self. I'm offering you something that ninety-nine men out of a hundred would jump at in your position, and you throw it in my face. You won't be any happier as your own master, I can tell you that. You've learnt your Catechism, and you know what it says about doing your duty in the state of life to which you are called. You are called plainly to the state of life in which you can do your share in keeping up the institutions that have made this country what it is; and you won't be doing right if you try to go outside it."

"Well, you'll excuse me, sir, if I don't see things quite in the same light. As long as I'm in your service, sir, I'll do my duty as well as I know how. But every man has got a right to try and better himself, to my way of thinking, and I did hope as how you'd see that, and lend me a hand to do well for myself."

The Squire straightened himself. "I see it's no use talking sensibly to you, Gotch," he said. "You simply repeat the same things over and over again. If you want me to promise you money to take you out of the

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country when I think it's plainly pointed out by Providence that you should stay in it, I'm sorry I don't see my way to oblige you. In the meantime you may consider the offer I made to you open for the present. It's a very good one, and you'll be a fool if you don't take it. And I shan't keep it open indefinitely. I shouldn't keep it open at all, after the way you have spoken, if it hadn't been for what you did a fortnight ago. And it's that or nothing."

He turned towards his writing table. Gotch, after a pause as if he were going to say something more, glanced at the profile presented to him, said, "Thank you, sir," and went out.

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CHAPTER VIII

PROPOSALS

"WELL, my dear, everybody seems to be busily employed except you and me. It's a fine morning. Supposing we go for a walk together!"

Lord Sedbergh beamed upon Joan affectionately. He was a stoutish, elderly man, with a large, clean-shaven face, not unhandsome, and noticeably kind, and a bald head fringed with grey-white hair. He had arrived at Kencote the afternoon before, to find his son recovering as fast as could be hoped for, and to make a pleasant impression on the company there assembled by his readiness to make friends all round. He and the Squire were cronies already, and took delight in reminiscences of their bright youth, which seemed to come nearer to them at every story told.

The sky was clear and frosty, the sun bestowed mild brilliance on the browns and purples and greens of the winter landscape, the roads were hard and clean under foot. It was the right morning for a long walk, that form of recreation so seldom enjoyed for its own sake by the Squire of Kencote and his likes. He came to the door as Joan and Lord Sedbergh were setting out together, and expressed a hope that Joan was not boring her companion. "I've got things that I *must* do for another hour or so," he said; "but we could go up to the

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home farm at eleven o'clock if that suited you; and the papers will be here in half-an-hour."

"My dear Edward," said Lord Sedbergh, "I wouldn't lose my walk with my friend Joan for all the home farms in the world, or all the papers that were ever written. And as for her boring me, she couldn't do it if she tried. Come along, Joan."

Lord Sedbergh had a trace of the garrulity that distinguished the conversation of his son, but it was a ripe garrulity, founded on wide experience of the world, and great good will towards mankind. And he had gifts of taste and knowledge besides, although his indolence had prevented him making any significant use of them. Joan found him the most agreeable company, almost as diverting as her uncle, Sir Herbert Birkett, and just as informative as an elderly man has a right to be with an intelligent young girl for her entertainment, and no more.

He told her about his early life in foreign cities, and amused her with his stories. An easy strain of past intimacy with notable people and events ran through his talk.

"Life was very interesting in those days," he said. "I often wish I had stuck to diplomacy. I might have been an ambassador by this time—probably should have been."

"Why did you give it up?" asked Joan.

"Well, to tell you the truth, my dear, if I hadn't given it up when I did I should have been appointed to the Embassy at Washington; and don't breathe a

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word of it to your charming sister-in-law, but I have no particular use for America. There it is, you see—probably, after all, I should not have been made an ambassador. It wasn't the diplomatic game I so much cared about, or Washington would have done as well as any other place to play it in. No, it was the life of foreign cities I liked as a young man. I like it still. I go abroad a great deal, and wander all over the place. I like pictures and churches now, though I can't say I paid much attention to that sort of thing in the old days. Yes, it is one of my chief pleasures now, to go abroad. I have been all over Europe."

"I should love to go abroad," said Joan. "I have never been out of England, and very seldom away from Kencote."

He looked at her affectionately. "You have a great deal of pleasure to come," he said, "and I am very much hoping that it may come to me to give you some of it. Tell me, my little Joan, are you going to give that boy of mine what he wants?"

The abrupt transition threw her into confusion. She put her muff to her mouth, and took it away again to stammer, "I don't know. I mean I haven't thought of it—of anything."

He withdrew his eyes from her face. "Well, I suppose it is rather impertinent of me to ask such a question," he said, "before he has asked it himself. But I think it is plain enough that he wants to ask it, if you will let him; and you see I'm so interested in the answer you are going to give him, on my own account,

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that I find it difficult to keep away from it. You must put it down to the impatience of old age, Joan. The things old people want they want quickly."

"You are not old," said Joan in a turmoil.

"Not so old, my dear, but what we shall have many good times together, if you come to us, as I hope you will. I shouldn't allow Bobby to monopolise you, you know. When he did his bit of soldiering in the summer you and I would go off on a trip together. And we'd drag him away from his hunting sometimes, and go off in search of sunshine—Egypt, Algiers, all sorts of places—make up a little party. And you and I would get together at Brummels occasionally, and amuse ourselves quietly while the rest of them were making a noise, as we did before. Oh, I tell you, I've got very selfish designs on you, my dear; but I shouldn't be in the way, you know; I should never be in the way. I shouldn't want to make Bobby jealous."

It crossed Joan's mind that if he were to be always in the way, and Bobby out of it, the proposal would be more attractive than it was at present. But so many thoughts crossed her mind while he was speaking, and she could not give expression to any one of them.

He looked at her with kind eyes. "You do like him, little Joan, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, "but—oh, not in that way." Again her muff went to her face.

A shade of disappointment crossed his. "Then I mustn't press you," he said. "But you are very young, my dear. Perhaps some day——! And I shall be a

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very pleased old man if I can one day have you for a daughter. There would be a house ready for you, and all—a charming house—you saw it—the Lodge, you know. I lived there when I was first married. I should like to see *you* there. I'd do it up for you from top to toe, exactly as you liked it. And I'd give you a motor-car of your own to get about in and pay your visits; and there are good stables if you want to ride. I hope you would live there a good part of the year, and there would be plenty of room for your friends and relations. You would come to us, I hope, in London. Your own rooms would be kept for you in my house, and you could have them as you wanted them. There would be Scotland in the Autumn. You've never seen Glenmuick. We're out all day there, and I don't know that it isn't even better than going abroad. Bobby doesn't care about fishing, but I think you would. We'd leave him to his stalking, and go off and spend long days on the loch and by the river. You'd never get tired of that. Then there's the yacht. You'd get lots of fun out of the yacht, if you like that sort of thing. We generally go to Cowes, and have a little cruise afterwards, just to blow away the cobwebs we get from amusing ourselves too hard in London. You'd get lots of change, and your pretty house as a background to it all, where you'd be queen of your own kingdom, my little Joan. There now, it looks as if I were trying to tempt you, with all sorts of things that wouldn't really matter, unless you—— Well, of course, they do matter. Love in a cottage is all very well, but I think young people

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are likely to get on better together if they've both got something to do. And you'd have plenty to do. I don't think you would ever feel dull."

If Mrs. Clinton had heard this speech she might not have felt so confident of its failing of its purpose as she did when Bobby Trench disclosed his views on life at its most attractive. It amounted to the same exaltation of "a good time," but it sounded different from Lord Sedbergh's lips—fresher, opening up vistas, to a country-bred girl, who had only just sipped at the delights of change, and was in the first flush of adventurous youth. The inherent tendency of such a life as he had set forth to lose its salience, to satisfy no more than the stay-at-home life, which Joan was beginning to find so dull, could hardly be known to her at her age. It held of itself glamorous possibilities, of which not the least was the astonishing change viewed in herself. The girl who was liable to be told at any moment that if she did not behave herself she should be sent to bed, by her father, was the same girl that her father's friend thought of as the honoured mistress of a household, one on whom gifts were to be showered, whose society was to be courted, whose every wish was to be considered.

If only Bobby Trench were not included in the bright picture! And yet she liked him now, and his society was never irksome.

"You are awfully kind to me," she fluttered. "But——"

"Oh, I know, my dear," he soothed her. "You

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couldn't possibly give me any answer that I should like to have now. Only, I hope—— Well, I do want you for Bobby, my little Joan. And he's very fond of you, you know. It has made a different man of him—er—wanting you as he does. That's the effect that the right sort of girl ought to have on a man. Bobby will make a good husband, if he does get the right sort of girl; I'm quite sure of that. She would be able to do anything with him that she liked; make anything of him."

This was flattery of a searching kind, and it did seem to Joan that she would be able to do anything she liked with Bobby Trench. As for Bobby Trench's father, she would have liked to go home and tell Nancy that he was the sweetest old lamb in the world. He had healed to some extent the wound caused by her sad discovery that nobody wanted her, caused in its turn—although she did not know it—by the discovery that John Spence didn't want her. The fact that Bobby Trench wanted her didn't count; that Lord Sedbergh wanted her, did. Wonderful things were happening to her as well as to Nancy, and if Nancy had a secret to hug, so had she.

But her secret did not support her long; she was made of stuff too tender. A few hours after her exaltation at the hands of Lord Sedbergh she was shedding lonely tears because Nancy had been so unkind to her, having coldly repulsed an effort to draw out of her some admission as to how she stood with regard to her own now plainly confessed lover.

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"I don't want to talk about that—to you," she said. "You seem to have affairs of your own to attend to, and you can leave mine alone."

Lord Sedbergh took his departure, and with him went much of the glamour that he had thrown over the proposal which Joan now knew must come. Bobby Trench, undiluted, pleased her less than before, and in a house full of people, with most of whom he had been wont to make common merriment, it vexed her to be constantly left with him in a solitude of two.

There was an air of expectancy about the house. It hovered with amused gratification over John Spence and Nancy, but blew more coldly watchful upon herself and Bobby Trench. It seemed that if she did what she bitterly told herself was expected of her, she would not please anybody particularly, except Bobby Trench himself. Even her father seemed to watch her suspiciously, but that she supposed was because he was doubtful whether naughtiness would not prevail in her after all. As for her mother, she invited no confidences. Joan felt more and more alone, and more and more dissatisfied with herself and everybody about her. Her intercourse with Bobby Trench was less evenly amicable than it had been, for she felt her power to make him suffer for some of her moods. But he did, sometimes, with his unfailing cheerfulness lift her out of them, and she wavered between resentment against him for being the past cause of her present troubles, and remorseful gratitude for his unconquerable fidelity.

She had been unusually fractious with him on the

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afternoon preceding the ball. Perhaps it was because she could not go to it herself, being out of sorts, and confined to the house by doctor's orders. The house-party was on the ice on the lake, enjoying itself exceedingly. She and Bobby were sitting in front of the fire in the morning-room.

"I say, you seem to have got out of bed the wrong side this morning," he said with a conciliatory grin. "What have you got the hump about?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Joan. "Everything is so dull, and everybody is so horrid."

"You're not such good pals with Nancy as you used to be, are you?" he asked after a pause.

"That has nothing to do with you," she said, following her mood of snappish domination over him.

His reply startled her. "Look here," he said, "I'm getting fed up with this. I seem to be about the only person in the house who takes any trouble to make themselves agreeable to you, and I'm the only person you can't treat with ordinary politeness. What's the matter? What have I done?"

He spoke sharply, as he had not spoken before, and his words brought home to her the sad state of isolation in which she imagined herself to be living.

"I know perfectly well how things are going," he went on, as she did not reply. "There's going to be an engagement in this house in about five minutes, and a general flare up of congratulations and excitement all round; and you're feeling out of it. I can understand that; but why you should turn round upon me,

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when I've laid myself out to be agreeable to you—and haven't worried you either—I *don't* understand. I call it devilish unfair."

Joan felt that it *was* unfair. It was true that he had often caused her to forget her troubles; and it was true that he had not "worried" her for days.

"I am rather unhappy, sometimes, about things I don't want to talk about," she said; "but I'm sorry if I've been disagreeable. I won't be any more. Shall we play bezique?"

"No, we won't play bezique. We'll talk. Look here, you know quite well what I want of you. I've been——"

"I don't want to talk about that."

"Well, I do, and you've got to listen this time. I've been playing the game exactly as you wanted it so far, and you can't refuse to give me my innings."

This also was fair; and as love-making was apparently not to be introduced into the game, Joan sat silent, looking into the fire, her chin on her hand, and a flush on her cheeks.

"It's pretty plain," he went on, "that I haven't got much farther with you in the way I should like to have done. You've always shown you didn't want me to make love to you, and I haven't bothered you much in that way; now have I?"

"No," said Joan. "And I shan't listen to you if you do."

"All right. I'm not going to. But there's another way of looking at things. We do get on well together,

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and you do like me a bit better than you used to, don't you? Now answer straight."

"I don't like you any better in the way I suppose you want me to, if that's what you mean."

"No, it isn't what I mean. I've said that. I mean, we *are* friends, aren't we? If I were to go away to-morrow, and you were never to see anything more of me, you would remember me as a friend, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, then, look here! Can't we fix it up together? No, don't say anything yet; I want to put it to you. You're having a pretty dull time here, and you'll have a jolly sight duller time when your sister gets married and goes away. But we'll give you the time of your life. My old governor is almost as much in love with you as I am, and that's saying a good deal, though you won't let me say it. He's longing to have you, and there's nothing he won't do for us in the way of setting us up. Look here, Joan, I'll do every mortal thing I can to make you happy; and so will all of us. You'll be the chief performer in *our* little circus; and it won't be such a little one, either. We can give you anything, pretty well, that anybody could want, and will lay ourselves out to do it. You won't find me such a bad fellow to live with, Joan. We *are* pals, you know, already; you've said so. Can't you give it a chance?"

Dispossessed of its emotional constituents, the proposal was not without its allure; and, so dispossessed, could be faced, or at least glanced at, without undue confusion of face.

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Joan glanced at it, and said, "Lord Sedbergh is very sweet to me."

"Well, he's sweet *on* you, you know," said Bobby with a grin. "Do say yes, Joan. It'll make him the happiest man in the world—except me. I *know* you won't regret it. I shan't let you. I shall lay myself out to do exactly what you want; and there's such a lot I can do, if you'll only let me. For one thing, you'd be taken out of everything that's bothering you now, at a stroke. You'll have such a lot of attention paid to you that you'll be likely to get your head turned; but I shan't mind that, if it's turned the right way. Joan, let my old Governor and me show what we can do to look after you and give you a good time."

She twisted her handkerchief in her hands. "Oh, it's awfully good of you both to want me so much," she said; and his eyes brightened, because hitherto she had shown that she thought it anything but good of him to want her so much. "But how can I? I don't love you, Bobby."

She said it almost as if she wished she did; and the childish plaintiveness in her voice moved him deeply. His voice shook a little as he replied, still in the same dispassionate tone, "I know you don't, my dear, but I'll put up with that. *I* love *you;* and that will have to do for both of us."

She looked at him with a smile. "That would be rather a one-sided bargain, wouldn't it?"

"*I* don't think so. It's as a pal I should want you chiefly, and you would be that. You are already."

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She looked into the fire again, with a slight frown on her face. But it was only a frown of indecision. How should she have known enough about men to detect the unreality in *that* plea?

He waited for her to speak, putting strong constraint on himself.

"Oh, I can't," she said at last.

He took her hand. "Joan, my dear," he said, "will you marry me? I'll wait for what you can't give me now, and never worry you for it. Honour bright, I won't."

She let her hand remain in his for a moment, and then sprang up. "Oh, they're coming in," she cried.

He swore under his breath, but rose too, and said, as voices were heard approaching, "Think over it, and tell me to-morrow."

Joan lay awake for a long time that night. She had gone to bed when the others had driven off to their ball, about nine o'clock.

She was offered a way of escape—she did not examine herself as to what from. Bobby had been very nice to her—not silly, at all. Nobody else wanted her, Nancy least of all. Very likely Nancy was even now being offered *her* escape; the idea had got about that John Spence would unbosom himself to the sound of the violins. She would have liked to have talked to her mother, but had not had an opportunity. When she considered what she should say to her, when the opportunity came, she discovered that she did not want to

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say anything. If she had been able to tell her that she loved Bobby Trench, it would have been different. No, she did not love him. But she liked him—very much. And she liked Lord Sedbergh even more. She supposed she loved her father, in fact she was sure she did; but Lord Sedbergh would also be in the place of a father to her, if she married Bobby Trench, and it would not be wrong to love him, perhaps rather better. He would certainly know how to treat her better.

Should she—should she not?

She had not quite made up her mind when she dropped off to sleep.

She was awakened by Nancy coming into the room, with Hannah, both of them speaking softly. She pretended not to have been awakened, but through her lashes sought for signs in Nancy's face.

There were none, except that she seemed unusually gay for that time of the morning, made soft laughter with Hannah, and dismissed her suddenly before she had finished undressing.

When Hannah had left the room Nancy looked straight at Joan, lying with her face turned towards her. Joan shut her eyes, and did not see the expression with which she looked at her. When she opened them again Nancy was standing by the fire, looking into the embers; and now there was no mistaking the look on her face. It was tender and radiant.

All Joan's soreness was wiped out. Nancy was very happy, and she wanted to kiss her again and again, and cry, and tell her how much she loved her. She

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moved in her bed, coughed, and opened her eyes. Nancy was looking at her with a face from which the radiance had melted; she left the fireplace and went to the dressing-table.

"Hullo!" she said. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, thanks," said Joan, choking her emotion. "Have you enjoyed yourself?"

"Yes, thanks. I wish you'd been there. The band was ripping, and the floor was perfect."

She talked on a little longer, and Joan began to think nothing had happened after all. Then she said suddenly, "By the by, I'm engaged to John Spence. I thought you'd like to know."

Joan could not speak for the moment. Nancy drew aside the curtain and looked out. "It's freezing hard," she said. "I shall wear my tweed coat and skirt tomorrow. Well, good-night!"

She did not look at Joan as she turned away from the window, but blew out the lights and got into bed.

There was a long silence. Both girls lay perfectly still. By and by sounds came from Joan's pillow, as if she were crying softly and trying to hide it. Nancy lay quite still, and the sounds ceased.

There was another long silence.

"Nancy, are you awake?" came in a voice that shook a little.

"Yes."

"I'm m-most awfully glad."

"Then what are you crying for?"

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"Because I'm sorry I've been such a pig; and I d-do so want to be friends again; and you won't."

"Oh, I will, darling old Joan."

Nancy was out of bed, and had thrown herself on Joan's neck. They were mingling tears and kisses together, Nancy crying quite as freely as Joan. They lay talking together for an hour or more, and fell asleep in one another's arms. When morning came, Joan had the happiest waking she had known for many months.

That afternoon she told Bobby Trench that she could not marry him. "I'm very sorry," she said. "I do like you, Bobby, and I hope we shall always be friends; but I don't love you the least little bit, and I'm quite sure now that one ought not to marry anyone one doesn't love."

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BOOK III

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CHAPTER I

THE SQUIRE CONFRONTED

THE lilacs in the station-yard at Kencote were blossoming again. Again the train crawled over the sun-dappled meadows, and Joan was on the platform to meet it. This time it was Humphrey who got out of it.

"Hullo!" she said brightly. "They've sent the luggage-cart. I thought you'd like to walk."

He had hardly smiled when she greeted him, and now frowned. "I wanted to see the Governor," he said. "However, it won't take long to walk. Come along."

"How's Susan?" Joan asked as they set out.

"All right," said Humphrey shortly. "She's gone to her people."

He cleared the preoccupation from his face, and looked at his sister. "You look blooming," he said. "Do you miss Nancy?"

"Yes, awfully," she said, "but I'm going to stay with them the moment they get back. I hear from her every day. They're having a gorgeous time. They are going to take me abroad with them next year. I shall love it."

"I've got a piece of news for you," said Humphrey after a pause. "Bobby Trench is engaged to be married."

A flush crept over her face and died away again be-

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fore she said, "That's rather sudden, isn't it? Who is he going to marry?"

"Lady Bertha Willersley. Can't say I admire his taste much. She's amusing enough for a time, but I should think she'd tire you to death if you had too much of her. She can't be much younger than he is, either. She's been about almost ever since I can remember."

"Oh, well," said Joan, with an embarrassed laugh, "it shows I was right."

"I'm not sure that it doesn't," Humphrey admitted. "Bobby has always been a friend of mine, and I like him well enough; but he *is* rather a rotter. I think you're pretty well out of it, Joan."

"I'm sure I am," she said. "But you didn't say so at the time."

"Poor old girl," he said. "We gave you rather a bad time, didn't we? But you did lead him on a bit, didn't you?"

"I didn't," said Joan indignantly. "I always said I wouldn't have him."

"Well, he told me himself that you would have said 'yes' one evening if somebody hadn't come in."

She was silent.

"It's true then?" he said, with a glance at her.

"Oh, I don't know. I *might* have done, but I should have been very sorry for it afterwards."

"You'd have had a topping good time."

"I suppose that is what tempted me, just a little. But it would be horrid to marry for that."

"What made you change? He was most awfully in

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love with you, to do him justice, though he seems to have got over it pretty quickly."

"Yes, he did seem to be. But it shows how little it was worth. It wasn't the sort of way John was in love with Nancy."

"It was when Nancy fixed up her little affair that you sent Bobby about his business."

"Yes. Don't let's talk about it any more. I'm sick of Bobby Trench."

"Governor been at you about him?"

"He has never forgiven me. Perhaps he will now. But I know mother was glad, so I don't much care."

"How is the Governor?" asked Humphrey, rather gloomily. "Fairly amiable?"

"Fairly. I think he misses Nancy; but of course he is glad she married John. He is so well off."

Humphrey took no notice of this shaft. He hardly spoke again until they reached the house, when he went straight into his father's room.

"Well, my boy," said the Squire. "What good wind blows you here? I thought you were moving down to Hampshire this week."

"The house isn't quite ready yet. Susan has gone to her people. I thought I'd run down. And—I've got something to talk to you about."

"Yes, well!" The Squire was a little suspicious. He didn't want to part with any money for the moment.

"What have you decided about Gotch? Clark is leaving us, and wants things settled. She doesn't want to find another place. She wants to get married."

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"Well, then, let her get married," said the Squire, with some show of heat. "It's nothing to do with me. Let Gotch marry her, and find a place to take her to, if he can. I've no room for another married keeper here, as I've filled up the place that Mr. Gotch saw fit to refuse."

"Yes, I know," said Humphrey. "But look here, father, can't you forget that now, and do what he wants? He did me a jolly good turn, you know. I might have been killed, or injured for life, if it hadn't been for him."

"I know all that, and I was ready to make him the most handsome reward for what he did. He saw fit to refuse it, as I think in the most ungrateful way, and there's an end. I kept the offer open for a month. I did everything that could be expected of me, and a good deal more. I've washed my hands of Mr. Gotch altogether."

"I don't think he's ungrateful. But he has this exceptionally good offer in Canada, if he can put down a few hundred pounds, and——"

"Then let him put down his few hundred pounds. I've no objection."

"He hasn't got it, you know," said Humphrey, with weary patience. "He and Clark have both got a bit, but not enough, and I can't do anything for them at the moment. Denny Croft has cost a lot more than I thought it would to put right, and I haven't got a bob to spare."

"Now, look here, Humphrey. I'm not going to do

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it, and that's flat. Apart altogether from the fact that I don't think Gotch has behaved well, and I feel myself relieved of all obligation to him now, I object to this emptying of the country that's going on. As long as there are places in England for men like Gotch, I say it's their duty to stay by the old country. Supposing every keeper and farm-hand and so on on this place took it into his head to go off to Canada, where should we be, I should like to know? It's the duty of the people on the land to stick together, or the whole basis of society goes. *I* stick here and do my duty in *my* sphere; *I* don't want to go rushing off to Canada; and I expect others in *their* sphere to do the same. It's quite certain I'm not going to put down money to help them to run away from their duty. So let's have no more talk about it."

Humphrey did not seem to have been listening very closely to this speech. He did not reply to it.

"Something very disagreeable has happened," he said. "I don't want to tell you the details of it. But it is important that Clark should be got out of the country as soon as possible."

The Squire stared at him, and marked for the first time his serious face. "What do you mean?" he asked. "What has happened?"

"I don't want to tell you more than this, that Clark has it in her power to make mischief. I hope you won't ask any more, but will take my word for it; it's very serious mischief. It's *she* who wants to go to Canada. I think if Gotch had been left to himself he would have

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accepted your offer; and I know he is upset at the way you have taken his refusal. Do, for God's sake, let him have what he wants, and take her off, or I don't know what won't happen."

His ordinary level speech had become agitated, but he returned to himself again as he said quietly, "I've said more than I meant to. Take it from me that I'm not exaggerating, and do what I ask, for your own sake as well as mine."

A stormy gleam of light had broken over the Squire's puzzled features. "Do you mean to tell me that you're in disgrace—with this woman?" he asked.

Humphrey looked at him, and then laughed, without amusement. "Oh, it's nothing like that," he said. "But disgrace—yes. It will amount to that for all of us. Mud will stick, and she's prepared to throw it. She has said nothing to Gotch, and has promised not to. She'll say nothing to anybody, if we lend Gotch the money. That's all he wants, you know. He'll pay it back when he's made his way. We must lend him three hundred pounds. He's a steady man and safe. I'd *give* it him, if I had it. It's the greatest luck in the world that we can close her mouth in that way. Oh, you *must* do it, father."

He had become agitated again; and it was the rarest thing for him to show agitation.

The Squire was impressed. "I don't say I won't," he said; "but you must show me some cause, Humphrey. I don't understand it yet. And anyhow, I'm not going to pay blackmail, you know. What's the story this

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woman has got hold of—if you've done nothing, as you say?"

"No, I've done nothing. I don't want to tell you her story, father; and it will do you no good to hear it. Besides, it simply *must* be kept from getting out. You tell a thing in confidence to one person, and they tell it in confidence to another; and it's public property and the mischief done before you know where you are."

"I shan't tell a soul."

"Can't you just trust me, and think no more about it?"

"No, I can't, Humphrey. You must tell me what it's all about. I can't act in the dark."

Humphrey sat silent, looking on the ground, while the Squire, with a troubled look on his face, waited for him to speak.

He looked up. "Will you promise me definitely that you'll keep it absolutely to yourself?" he asked. "Mother mustn't know, or Dick, or anybody."

"Why not? Neither of them would breathe a word."

"I won't tell it to more than one person. If you won't promise to keep it sacred and give nobody a hint that might put them on the scent, I'll tell somebody else. I *must* tell somebody, and get advice, as well as money."

"I don't keep things from Dick," said the Squire slowly, "and very seldom from your mother. I'm not a man who likes hugging a secret. If I give you this promise it will be a weight on me. But I'll do it if you assure me that there is some special reason why

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neither of those two shall be told. I think they ought to be, if it's a question of disgrace, and a way of averting it. I shouldn't like to trust myself to give you the right advice, without consulting them—or at any rate, Dick."

Humphrey considered again. "No, I won't risk it," he said. "Yes; there *is* a special reason. It is not to be a matter of consultation, except between you and me."

"Very well," said the Squire unwillingly, "I will tell nobody."

"Not even if they see something is wrong, and press you?"

"You have my word, Humphrey," said the Squire simply.

Humphrey wrung his hands together nervously. "Oh, it's a miserable story," he said. "Clark accuses Susan of stealing that necklace from Brummels."

"What!" exclaimed the Squire, horrified.

"She's prepared to swear to it, and says she will go and lay information, unless we do what they want—help Gotch to settle in Canada."

The Squire sprang from his seat and strode the length of the room. His face was terrific as he turned and stood before Humphrey. "But that's the most scandalous case of blackmail I ever heard of," he said. "You mean to say you are prepared to give in to that! And expect me to help you! You ought to be ashamed of asking such a thing, Humphrey. And to extract a promise from me to keep *that* to myself! What can

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you be thinking of? I've not much difficulty in advising you if that's the sort of trouble you're in. Send for a policeman, and have the woman locked up at once. The brazen insolence of it! Let the whole world know of it, if they want to, I say. Your honour can't stand much if *that* sort of mud is going to stain it. It's your positive duty. I can't think what you can have been thinking of not to do it at once. To give in to the woman! Why, it's shameful, Humphrey! Disgrace! That's where the disgrace is."

Humphrey had sat silent under this exordium, his head bent and his eyes on the ground. He said no word when his father had finished.

A half-frightened look came over the Squire's face. "You've allowed this woman to impose upon you," he said in a quieter voice. "You've lost your head, my boy. Take hold of yourself, and fling the lie back in her face. *Punish* her for it."

There was another pause before Humphrey said, raising his head, but not his eyes: "It isn't a lie. It's the truth. Oh, my God!"

His frame was shaken by a great sob. He leant forward and buried his face in his hands.

The Squire sat down heavily in his chair. He picked up a paper-knife from the writing-table and balanced it in his hand. For a moment his face was devoid of all expression. Then he turned round to his son and said in a firm voice: "You say Susan did steal them? Are you sure of that? Joan as good as saw that Mrs. Amberley take them. Yes, and it was proved that she

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sold them, at her trial! Aren't you allowing this woman to bluff you, Humphrey?"

His voice had taken a note of confidence. Humphrey sat up, his face white and hard.

"Mrs. Amberley's selling pearls was a coincidence—unlucky for her," he said. "We know where she got them from. The story they wouldn't listen to was true."

"But Joan!—seeing her at the very cupboard itself!"

"She may have *wanted* to steal them. She did steal the diamond star."

The Squire drooped. "Still, it may be bluff," he said weakly. "How did Clark know of it?"

"Oh, don't turn the knife round, father," said Humphrey. "It isn't Clark; it's Susan. She told me herself."

"She told you she was a thief!" The Squire's voice had changed, and was harder.

"Yes. It's a wretched story. Don't make it harder for me to tell."

The control in which he had held himself, coming down in the train, walking from the station with Joan, and first addressing his father, was gone. He spoke as if he were broken, but in a hard, monotonous voice.

The Squire's face softened. "Go on, my boy," he said. "Tell me everything. I'll help you if I can."

"I taxed her with it. She's frightened to death. I could only get at it by degrees; and there are some

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things I don't understand now. I shall clear them up when she's better. She's ill now, and I don't wonder at it."

"Where is she?"

"With her mother. *She* doesn't know anything. She thinks we've had a row."

"Well, tell me."

"I was a fool not to suspect what was going on. She was head over ears in debt. What she must have been spending on clothes it frightens me to think of. She told me that she had got somebody to make them for almost nothing, but I might have known that was nonsense, if I'd thought about it at all. I remember now some woman or other laughing at me when I told her she dressed herself on two hundred a year. 'I suppose you mean two thousand,' she said, and I should think it couldn't have been much less than that. She had things put away that I'd never seen. She didn't disclose half what she owed when you helped us two years ago. Then she'd been playing Bridge with a lot of harpies—Auction—at sixpenny points—and she's no more head for it than an infant in arms."

"Sixpenny points!" repeated the Squire.

"Well, it means she could easily lose forty or fifty pounds in an afternoon, and probably did, often enough. She had to find ready money for that. I haven't got at it all yet, but when we went down to Brummels she didn't know which way to turn, and was desperate—ready to do anything. I know there was a—— No, I can't tell you that; and it doesn't matter. I'm

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not sure it isn't as well for her, and for me, that she did get the money in the way she did."

The Squire's face was very grave. "You know, Humphrey, if she has deceived you, and is capable of this horrible theft, you ought to satisfy yourself——"

Humphrey broke down again, but recovered himself quickly. "Thank God, I know everything," he said. "Everything that matters. She was terrified. She turned to me. There's nothing between us. It's all partly my fault. I'd been in debt myself, and hadn't helped her to keep straight. And we'd had rows, and she was afraid to tell me things."

"Go on, my dear boy," said the Squire very kindly.

"It's soon told. She heard Lady Sedbergh and Mrs. Amberley talking about the hiding-place."

"Was she in the room?"

"She was just outside. The door was open."

"She listened?"

"Yes. She stayed outside, and listened. They went out by another door, and she went into the room at once and took the necklace. She pawned pearls here and there, going out in the evening, veiled, but in a foolish, reckless way. I can't conceive why something didn't come out at the trial. It was she who gave Rachel Amberley's name at that place in the city. She's about the same height. But imagine the folly of it! She says that it 'came over her' to do it, and she only did it that once. She seems to have made up names at the other places."

"Did she get rid of all the pearls?"

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"That's what I can't make out yet. She got enough money to pay up everything; but not more. She can't say how much, but it can't possibly have been what the pearls were worth. Perhaps she let some of them go at an absurd value, which would be a reason for those who had got them to lie low. I couldn't get at everything; there was so much that I had to ask about; and she wasn't in a state—— Oh, she'd have been capable of any folly—even throwing some of them away, if she got frightened. We've been dancing on gunpowder. Clark knew all along; or almost from the first."

"Did she help her?"

"Oh no. She was fond of her; she was the daughter of one of their gardeners."

"Are you *sure* she didn't help her? What do you mean—she was fond of her?"

"I mean that she might have given her away."

"She knew at the time of the trial?"

"Yes."

"Did she threaten Susan, then?"

"No. I think she never meant to do anything at all. Susan had given her a lot of things. She was in with her to that extent—knew about her dressmaking bills. And she wanted to marry Gotch, and Gotch is loyal to us. She didn't want to make trouble. It was only Gotch being kept hanging on about Canada that put it into her head that she had a weapon."

"But you say she threatened you. She must be a bad woman."

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"Well, I put her back up. She came to me and said she wanted something done at once, and hinted that she knew things. I was angry at being pressed in that way, and made her speak out. I believe, at first, she thought I was in it; or she wouldn't have come to me in the way she did. I soon disabused her of that idea, if she really held it, and I was furious. I thought it was blackmail, as you did. I threatened to have her up. That scandalised her, and she convinced me that she was telling the truth. She told me to go and ask Susan, if I didn't believe her. It was then, when she had burnt her boats, that she threatened."

"Well—however you look at it—it *is* blackmail. She's ready to compound a felony. And we are asked to do the same. Humphrey, this is a terrible story. It's the blackest day I've ever known. I don't think I've quite taken it all in yet. Susan a thief! All that we've said and thought about that other woman—and justly too, if she'd been guilty—applies to—to one of ourselves—to a Clinton. I feel stunned by it. I don't know what to say or do."

His face was grey. His very tranquillity showed how deeply he had been hit.

"What we have to do," said Humphrey, "is to avert the disgrace to our name. Fortunately that can be done. It isn't blackmail; Clark never thought of it in that light, or she would have moved long ago. She thought we were not treating Gotch well in refusing him what he asked, after what he had done, and the promises we had made him. *He'll* never know anything

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about it. Have him in and tell him that you will lend him the money he wants. That cuts the whole horrible knot."

The Squire made no answer to this. "She is *more* guilty than the other woman," he went on, as if Humphrey had not spoken. "She stood by and saw an innocent woman suffer. Humphrey, it was very base."

"Mrs. Amberley *wasn't* innocent," said Humphrey. "She went to steal the necklace, and found it gone. She *did* steal the star, and that was what she was punished for. Her punishment was deserved. Besides, it's over now. You know that she was let out. She has gone to America. We shall never hear of her over here again."

"It's a very terrible story," said the Squire again. "I don't know what's to be done. I'm all at sea. I must—— Humphrey, why did you make me promise to keep this a secret? Dick ought to be told. He's got a cooler head than I have."

"Dick shall *not* be told," said Humphrey, almost with violence. "Nor anyone else. We've got to settle this between ourselves. Nobody must suspect anything, and nobody must be put in the position of treating Susan so that others will be tempted to talk about it. If she came down here, and there were two besides you—and me—who knew what she had done, it would be an impossible position. I've made up my mind absolutely about that, and you gave me your word."

"Susan down here!" repeated the Squire, in a tone that made Humphrey wince.

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"You won't be asked to have more to do with her than is necessary to keep away all suspicion," he said. "It isn't Susan you have to think of—that's my business—it's yourself, and the whole lot of us. The scandal doesn't bear thinking of if it comes out. Think what it would mean. Think of all you said yourself about Mrs. Amberley. Think of the whole country saying that about one of us; and saying much more, because of what you said—of her keeping quiet about it. Oh, I'm not trying to defend her—but think of the ghastly disgrace. We should never hold up our heads again. Think of the dock for her—and prison! Father, you must put an end to it. Thank God it can be done, without touching your honour."

The knife had gone right home. The Squire sprang up from his chair and strode down the room again. "My honour!" he cried. "Oh, Humphrey, what honour is left to us after this?"

"Susan is sorry," Humphrey went on quickly. "Bitterly sorry. She has been quite different lately. She had a terrible shock. She is spending next to nothing now, and——"

"Oh!" The Squire glared at him, looking more like himself than he had done since Humphrey's disclosure. "She paid her debts out of stolen money. Yes, she was different, when she thought the danger had been removed, and that other woman was safe in prison. She was gay and light-hearted when she came here at Christmas, with that—that crime on her conscience. You say that as if it was to her credit!"

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"I don't!" said Humphrey sullenly. "But she is sorry now. She's punished. It isn't for us to punish her again; and punish ourselves. It's too ghastly to think about. Oh, what's the use of going on talking about it, father, while the risk is still hanging over us? Let me send a wire to Clark; or let Gotch do it, this evening. Then we can breathe freely, and talk about all the rest later."

The Squire took another turn down the room. "I won't be hurried into anything," he said with some indignation. "I won't think of what may happen until I've made up my mind, in case I should do something wrong, out of fear. Oh, why can't you let me call in Dick?"

"I won't. And you've *got* to think of what will happen. The name of Clinton horribly disgraced—held up to the most public scorn—not a corner to hide yourself in. It will last all *your* lifetime, and mine too, and go on to your grandchildren. You will never know another happy moment. The stain will never come out; it will stick to every one of us."

"Oh, that's enough," said the Squire, seating himself again.

He turned sharply round again. "What do you want me to do?" he asked angrily.

"Send for Gotch—send for him now this moment—and tell him that you have changed your mind. You will arrange to let him have the money he has asked for, and he can go off as soon as he likes."

"I'm to say I've changed my mind?"

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"Yes, of course. You don't want to set him wondering."

"Then he will let this woman, Clark, know——" He began to speak more slowly.

"Yes. I shall go back to-morrow morning and see her. I shall have a hold over her, and she will certainly keep quiet, for her own sake."

"She will be liable to prosecution if the truth becomes known from any other source."

"It won't be. She is the only person who knows anything."

"And *I* shall have compounded a felony too, if it becomes known."

"No. That isn't so. *You* will have nothing to do with her at all. You will never see her."

"That's true. But she will know why I pay this money."

"Not necessarily. No, she needn't know. I shall tell her I persuaded you. She doesn't know you were so definitely against it. She thinks it was just hanging fire."

The Squire rose from his seat, and went to the empty fireplace, where he took his stand, facing his son.

He looked at him steadily, and said in a quiet but firm voice, "I won't do it, Humphrey."

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CHAPTER II

A VERY PRESENT HELP

VIRGINIA among her flowers, in the sweet, old-fashioned retired garden of the Dower House was a sight to refresh the eyes. She was gathering a sheaf of long-stalked May-flowering tulips as Humphrey pushed open the gate leading from the park, and came in.

He was not able to keep all signs of the terrible blow that had been dealt him, and the disappointment that had come of the appeal he had just made to his father, from showing on his face; but he had schooled himself, walking across the park, to a natural bearing. He had to make another effort to avert such ruin and disgrace as would overwhelm him utterly, and make the rest of his life a burden and a reproach.

The sun was setting behind the tall elms that bordered the garden of the Dower House. The rooks were busy with their evening conference. The westward windows of the ancient, mellowed house were shining. Peace and hope sat brooding on the fair, home-enchanted place, and a lump sprang up in Humphrey's throat as he came upon it, and saw his brother's wife, so sweet and gracious, protected here and shut in from the ugliness of life, and quietly happy in her seclusion. The contrast between Virginia in her garden, and the desperate wreck of his own married life, was too

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poignant. He turned round to shut the door in the wall, but by the time she had looked up and seen him he had hardened himself against emotion.

She gave a little cry of pleasure. "Why, Humphrey!" she said, "I had no idea you were here. I am so glad to see you. I am all alone. Dick has gone up to dine and sleep in London."

The disappointment was so keen that his taut-stretched nerves gave way for a moment, and he felt physically ill.

"Why, what's the matter?" she said. "Is there any bad news? You look dreadful, Humphrey."

He forced a laugh. "I'm not very fit," he said. "But I had made sure of seeing Dick, about something rather important. When will he be back?"

"To morrow afternoon. But isn't there anything that I can do? Do tell me, Humphrey. Dick has no secrets from me, you know."

He was afraid to make any mystery. "Oh, it's only about the keeper, Gotch," he said at once. "Clark is leaving us, and they want to get married. They have both set their hearts on going to Canada, and I came down to see if I could get the Governor to consent to helping them. But he won't do it, and I was going to ask Dick if *he* could possibly raise the money."

"Oh, but, Humphrey—easily—if it isn't too much. What do they want?"

"Three hundred pounds—only as a loan. He would pay it back after the first year—in instalments—when he had got himself settled. He has a fine opportunity

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waiting for him over there. He ought not to miss it. I do feel that I owe him a lot. That scoundrel would have battered me to death, very likely, if he hadn't come on the scene. I wish to goodness I could give him the money myself. I *could* raise it, but it would take time. I want to go back to-morrow and tell Clark that it is all settled."

"Oh, you shall, Humphrey. Let me do it for you. I have heaps of money that I don't know what to do with. Dick won't let me spend a penny on living here. I believe he hates to think he has married a rich woman. I can write you a cheque now. Come indoors."

The relief was enormous. But many things had to be thought of. It was not only the money he had come for. He could have got that, as he had said, elsewhere, and no sacrifice would have been too great to make for it, if it had been all that was wanted.

"My dear Virginia," he said, "you are generosity itself; but I shouldn't like to take it from you without Dick knowing of it."

"Oh, I shall tell him, of course. But he won't mind. Why should he?"

"I don't know how he feels about Gotch going. The Governor is up in arms at his wanting to leave Kencote at all. Dick may feel the same, for all I know."

She laughed. "Oh, I see," she said. "We are up against the dear old feudal system. I am always forgetting about that; and I do try so hard to be British, Humphrey."

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Humphrey smiled. "You'll do as you are," he said. "I think myself that every fellow ought to have his chance. If he sees his way to doing well for himself it isn't fair to expect him to throw it away just because he's your servant, as his fathers were before him."

Virginia's face showed mock horror. "But, Humphrey!" she said, "this is rank Radicalism! *What!* A man who can have as many blankets and as much soup as he likes—to make up for the smallness of his wages—has a right to go off and be his own master! To think that I should hear such words from a Clinton!"

Humphrey could not keep it up. He smiled, but had no light answer ready. "Keepers get quite decent wages," he said, "and the Governor was prepared to put Gotch into that new cottage he's building; do well for him, in fact. That's why he thinks it ungrateful of him to want to go, and won't help in any way. The question is whether Dick won't feel the same."

"Oh, I think not," she said. "Dick is getting quite democratic. I, Virginia Clinton, have made him so. Why, the other day he actually said that the will of the people ought to prevail—if we could only find out what it was. He is getting on fast. No, Humphrey, I'm sure Dick won't mind. If I thought he would, I wouldn't do it—without asking him first. I am going to do it. I *want* to do it. I like to think of a young man like Gotch, good and strong, going off to carve himself out a place in a new country. You have all

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been very patient with me, and I love you all dearly, but I shall *never* come to think that it is a proper life for a man to spend all his days in bringing up birds for other people to kill. Now who shall I make the cheque out to—you or Gotch?"

She was at her writing-table with her cheque-book in front of her, and a pen in her hand. It was difficult to restrain her. But the cheque was not all that Humphrey wanted.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Let's get it right in our minds. Gotch doesn't want charity."

She put down her pen, and her delicate skin flushed. "I shouldn't offer it to him," she said. "I hate charity—the charity of the money-bags."

"Oh, my dear girl!" he said, "I didn't mean to hurt you. We're a clumsy race, you know; we think things out aloud. I was only wondering what would be the best way."

She smiled up at him, standing over her, her momentary offence gone. "Why, of course," she said. "We must help him without putting him under any obligation. How shall we do it?"

"You see, the money ought to come from the Governor, or Dick. If you or I were to give it him, and they had no hand in it, he would be leaving Kencote under a sort of cloud. He wouldn't want that, and I shouldn't like it for him. And I don't want the money to come from me. That would look as if I thought a money payment would be a suitable acknowledgment of what he did in coming to my rescue."

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There was more earnestness in his voice than his words seemed to warrant. Virginia looked a little puzzled. But her brow cleared again. Perhaps this was only one of those little niceties of feudal honour which she never did and never would understand.

"Well then, I'll tell you what I'll do," she said. "Let us go to Gotch together, and I'll give him my cheque and tell him that it comes from Dick, who is away."

He breathed deeply. "Are you sure Dick won't mind?" he asked.

"Quite sure. He said the other day that Gotch ought to be allowed to go if he wanted to."

"Did he really say that, Virginia?"

"Yes, it was when your father settled that the other man should have the new cottage. No, Dick won't mind. By the bye, are you sure that Mr. Clinton won't? If he objects to Gotch going——"

"He objects to helping him to go. I told him I should ask Dick."

"What did he say?"

"He said he should wash his hands of it."

"Oh, then, that's all right. Here is the cheque; we'll go and find Gotch, and give it him, and wish him joy. There is just time before dinner."

"Virginia," said Humphrey devoutly, "you are an angel."

That night Humphrey and his father sat up late together.

The Squire had gone through a terrible time since

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Humphrey had left him to go down to the Dower House, with the words, "Whatever you do, or don't do, I'm going to fight hard to save our name." All the usual outlets through which he was accustomed to relieve the pressure of an offence were denied him. Irritability would cause remark. And this was too deep and dreadful an offence to create irritability. High words would not assuage it; cries raised to heaven about the ingratitude of mankind, and his own liability to suffer from it, had been used too often over small matters to make them anything but a mockery as applied to this great one. He was stricken dumb by it.

The night was black all around him. There was no light to guide his steps. Even the one he had already taken he was in doubt about, now he had taken it. He did not question his own action in refusing to cut the knot. He had simply felt unable to do it, and had followed that light, as far as it had led him. But when Humphrey had gone away to find Dick, and ask him to provide money for Gotch, without telling him why it *must* be found, somewhere or other, he had hoped that Dick would consent; and this troubled him.

When he went upstairs to dress for dinner, after sitting motionless in the library for over an hour, he locked the door and knelt down by the bed in his dressing-room and prayed to God for help in his trouble and guidance in his difficulties. He had felt increasingly, as he sat and thought downstairs, that prayer was the only thing that would help him; but he could

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not kneel down in the library, and it was dishonouring to God Almighty not to kneel down when you prayed. So he went upstairs, earlier than his wont, to the bedside at which he had said his daily and nightly prayers for over forty years. He never slept in this bed; it was the altar of his private devotions, which were never pretermitted, although by lapse of time they had slid into a kind of home-made liturgy, which demanded small effort of spirit, and less of mind. But now he prayed earnestly, with bowed head and broken words, repeating the Lord's Prayer at the close of his petitions, and rising from his knees purged somewhat of his fears, and supported in his deep trouble.

At dinner he was a good deal silent, but not perceptibly brooding over disclosures made to him, as Humphrey had feared of him. He even smiled once or twice, and spoke courteously to his wife and affectionately to Joan. He took Joan's hand in his as she passed him to go out of the room with her mother, and she gave him a hug, and a kiss, which he returned. She thought that Humphrey had told him about Bobby Trench's engagement, and this was his way of showing that she was finally forgiven for rejecting that fickle suit. But it was his desire to find contact with innocence, and the tranquillity of his home, that had prompted the caress.

"Dick has gone up to London," he said, raising his eyes, when Humphrey had shut the door and come back to the table.

"Yes," said Humphrey. "But Virginia had the

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money, and said that Dick would like her to give it. He had told her that Gotch ought to be helped to go away."

"He never said that to me," said the Squire, with no clear sense of relief at the news, except that it meant that a decision had been taken out of his hands.

"Well, he had said it to her, or she wouldn't have done it. She and I went to Gotch together. She said just the right things, and he was as grateful as possible. He takes it that he's forgiven for holding out. I told him that you wouldn't do it yourself after all you had said, but you had withdrawn your opposition."

"Why do you say these things, Humphrey?" asked the Squire, in a pained and almost querulous voice. "None of them are lies, exactly, but they are not the truth, either."

"I shouldn't care if they *were* lies," said Humphrey. "I'm long past caring about that."

The Squire sighed deeply. "I won't talk about it over the table," he said, rising, and leaving his glass of port half full. "We will go and ask Joan to play to us, and talk in my room later."

As Joan played, he sat in his chair thinking. Relief was beginning to find its way into his sombre thoughts. He took it to be in answer to his prayer. If you took your difficulties to God, a way of escape would be opened out. The old aunts who had brought him up in his childhood had impressed that upon him, and he had never doubted it, although he had had no occasion hitherto to try the experiment. He had not made it

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a subject of prayer when Walter had so annoyed him by refusing to take Holy Orders with a view to the family living, and insisted on studying medicine, which no Clinton had ever done before; or when Cicely had gone off to stay in London without a with-your-leave or a by-your-leave; or when Dick had gone against his strong wishes and insisted upon marrying Virginia; or when Humphrey had come to him with debts; or even when Joan had refused to make a marriage which he thought to be well for her to make. Soothed by Joan's playing, his thoughts ran reflectively through these and other disturbances and difficulties that had marked his otherwise equable, prosperous life, and he saw for the first time how little he had really had to complain of.

But that enlightenment only seemed to deepen the black shadows that lay in the gulf opened out before him. The props of position and wealth that had sustained him were of no avail here. They had supported him in other troubles; they would only make this one worse to bear. It would find him stripped naked for the world to jeer at. This was the sort of trouble in which a man wanted help from above.

And the help had come, promptly; perhaps all the more promptly because he had acted uprightly. He could not have given in to Humphrey's request, whatever the consequences, knowing what he did. But that it should have been immediately met, in a way to which no objection could be taken, elsewhere, seemed to show that it was not the will of God that disgrace should

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overwhelm the innocent as well as the guilty. He could look that disgrace in the face now, or rather in the flank, as a peril past; and he went through almost unendurable pangs as he did so. He turned in his chair, and the perspiration broke out on his brow as the horror of what he had escaped came home to him. He thanked God that he had acted aright. If he had pictured to himself fully what might come from his refusal, he might have stained his honour with almost any act that would avert such appalling humiliation.

When he and Humphrey were alone together he spoke with more of his usual manner than he had hitherto done. "I can't justly complain of what you have done," he said. "Whether it would have been right to take any steps to save Susan herself from the consequence of what she has done—to hush it up—fortunately we haven't got to decide on. We can leave that in the hands of a higher power."

"She has been pretty well punished already," said Humphrey. "Right or wrong, I'm going to do what I can to keep the rest of her life from being ruined. Thank God, it *has* been done."

"Well, I think I can say 'Thank God' too. Others would have had to suffer—grievously—and, after all, no wrong has been done to anybody. With regard to Gotch, I can wash my hands of it. I couldn't have given him money myself, knowing what I did, and you must take the responsibility of it—with Dick."

"Oh, I'll take the responsibility," said Humphrey

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with a shade of contempt. "It won't trouble my conscience much."

"But now we have to consider what is to be done," said the Squire. "I can't have Susan here, Humphrey. She must never come here again. I won't add to your troubles, my boy, by talking about what she has done. I couldn't trust myself to do it. But I couldn't see her and behave as I always have done. It would be beyond my power."

"Very well," said Humphrey shortly. "I'll shoulder that, with the rest."

The Squire looked at him. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"What do you mean? With her?"

"Yes. How are you going to live together, after this?"

"As we always have done. I took her for better or worse. I'm going to do my duty by her. I'm going to protect her first of all from suffering any more; and then I'm going to help her to live it down—with herself. I haven't helped her much, so far. She is weak, and I've been weak with her—weak and selfish. I've got something more in me than I've shown yet, and now's the time to show it, and to help her on as well as myself."

The Squire was deeply touched. "My dear boy," he said, "I'm glad to hear you talk like that. Yes, you're right; you must be right. One can't judge of her leniently, perhaps, but what she must have gone through at the time of that trial—and before! You

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will be able to work on her; and nobody else could. Perhaps, later on—I don't know—I might bring myself——"

"I don't know that you need. I am going to take her away for some time—for some years, perhaps."

"What! You're not going to live in your new house?"

"No. I couldn't, yet awhile. So far, I've talked as if nothing mattered except getting clear of this horrible exposure that threatened us. I can't feel that anything does matter much until that is done. But that's not all I have been thinking of, father, since this blow came to me. It has gone pretty deep. I couldn't go on living the same sort of life, under rather different surroundings, but amongst people that we have known, and who would expect us to be just the same as we have always been. We've got to start together afresh, and get used to ourselves—to our new selves, if you like to put it so. We're going abroad. Susan is ill now, and we can make it seem natural enough. We shall stay abroad for some time, and then I shall let the house, if I can, so that it won't seem odd that we shouldn't come back. In a few years, if we want to, we can come back; and then perhaps we shall live there."

"Well, it wants thinking over carefully, Humphrey; but I think you are right. Still, I shouldn't like to lose sight of you—for years."

Humphrey was silent.

"I don't know—perhaps I was rather hasty, just now, when I said I couldn't have Susan here. I couldn't,

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now. But later on—— Oh, my boy, I don't want to make it harder for you than it is already. You've set yourself a big task. God help you to carry it through! Bring her here, Humphrey, in a year or so. I'm your father; I'll do what I can to help you."

"Thank you, father. You've been very good."

"If you want any money——"

"Oh no. We shan't be spending much—not for a long time."

Neither spoke for some minutes. Then the Squire frowned and cleared his throat. "There's one thing that has to be done," he said. "The—the taking of that necklace—Lady Sedbergh's—she has had this loss——"

"You mean about paying back the money. I've thought of that. I must do it by degrees. That's one reason why I'm going abroad. I can save more than half my income."

"Oh, you've thought of that."

"Yes. You didn't suppose I was going to hush it up, and do nothing about the money! I've not quite come down to that, father."

"Oh no, no, my boy. Only—well, it didn't occur to me for some time. But how could you do it—if it were left to you? How could you send money by degrees?"

"I haven't thought much about how to do it. Perhaps I should have to wait until I had got it all. Then I could send it in a lump, from some place where it couldn't be traced."

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The Squire spoke after a thoughtful pause. "I don't like that, Humphrey."

"Well, there is plenty of time to think out a way. I haven't got a penny of it yet."

"No; and it can't wait until you have saved it. I should never have a moment's peace of mind while it was owing. I must help you there, Humphrey. It's what I can do to help."

"Oh no, father. It's part of the price. I mean to pay it. It will keep it before us—going short. I wish I could have raised the money at once. I wish you hadn't made old Aunt Laura put that clause into her will."

The Squire rather wished he hadn't, too. Seven thousand pounds was a large sum to find. Something like thirty thousand pounds had been left to Humphrey, with reversion to Walter and his children. But the Squire had advised that Humphrey should be restrained from anticipation of his life interest, and this had been effected.

"Well," he said, "that's done. But this money must be paid at once. It will only be fair to the others, Humphrey, that it shall come off your share. But I will find it for you now. If you like to pay it, or some of it, back again, I won't say no. But that shall be as you like. It will be the same in the end."

"You are very good, father. But how can you do it without Dick's knowing?"

"Dick doesn't take part in all my affairs; only in matters that have to do with the land. I can raise

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it without affecting the estate accounts. He will know, probably, that something is being done, but he won't ask questions. Dick is very careful not to touch on my right to do what I please with my own."

At any other time Humphrey would have been interested in this statement. Like the sons of many rich men, he knew little of his father's affairs, and had only the vaguest ideas as to the amount and sources of his wealth. But he was only interested now in the fact that his father was able, and willing, to provide so large a sum as seven thousand pounds at once.

"It would be a tremendous relief to be rid of that burden," he said. "If you can do it, I would pay you back what I don't spend out of my income."

"Yes, I can do it, and I will, as soon as possible. But, Humphrey, my boy, this money can't be sent anonymously."

"Why not?"

"I don't think you can be expected to see everything very clearly yet. If you will think it over, you will see that we can't act in that way. You mustn't expect me to do it."

Humphrey thought for a time. "What do you suggest?" he asked.

"Either you or I must make a clean breast of it to Sedbergh!"

"Oh, father!"

"Yes. That must be done. Our honour demands it. You will see it plainly enough if you think it over. I believe you were right in stipulating for secrecy on my

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part, as you did. Certainly I couldn't behave as I want to do to Susan, when the time comes, if I knew that others in the house besides myself knew her story. But this is different. We mustn't act like cowards."

"Isn't he annoyed with us—about Joan?"

"Not annoyed. He was sorry. So was I—though I'm not sure now. I think my first instinct was the right one. The sort of life that's lived in houses like Brummels—well, you see what it leads to."

It was the old familiar song; but set to how different a tune! Humphrey, even in his pre-occupation, noted the change, and felt a sense of comfort and support in something stable, underlying the habitual crudities and inconsistencies in his father.

"Jim Sedbergh was a very intimate friend of mine," said the Squire, "many years ago. He is a friend still. We found we hadn't changed much to each other when he came here. I can trust him as I would trust myself. He will take the view I do, whatever it is. You had better let me see him, Humphrey. He'll keep whatever I tell him to himself."

They settled that he should go up to London the next day. That was all there was to settle for the present, and it was already very late.

"Well, good night, Humphrey, my dear boy," said the Squire. "You'll get through this great trouble. We shall all get through it in time. You know where to go for help and comfort. I've been there already, and I've got what I went for. God bless you, my dear boy. He will, if you ask Him."

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CHAPTER III

THE BURDEN

"My dear Edward, I am deeply sorry for you."

The Squire leant back in the big easy-chair and wiped his brow, which was beaded with perspiration. He had told his story, and it had been the bitterest task he had ever undertaken.

Lord Sedbergh's face was very serious. The two men had lunched together at his club, and were sitting in the inner upstairs library, with coffee and liqueurs at their elbows, by the window looking on to the green of the park—two men of substantial fortune and accredited position, entrenched in one of the rich retreats dedicated to the leisure of their exclusive kind.

But the Squire's curaçoa was untouched, and his cigar had gone out. The retired and tranquil luxury of his surroundings brought no sense of refuge; he felt naked before those others of his untroubled equals who, out of hearing in the larger room, would have looked up with reprehensive curiosity if they could have imagined what breath from the sordid outer world was tainting the temple of their comfort.

"I appreciate your courage in coming to tell me this; it must have cost you a deal. But I almost wish you hadn't."

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The Squire sat forward again, and drank his liqueur at a gulp.

"I couldn't leave it as it was," he said.

"Perhaps not; though most men in your case would have been inclined to do so. Have another cigar, Edward. That one hasn't lighted well."

The Squire accepted this offer. The worst was over; and his friend had taken the disclosure with all the kindness he had expected of him.

"I couldn't do anything myself to stop its coming out," he said, when his wants had been supplied. "But I can't find it in my heart to blame Humphrey for what he did. You couldn't say that this money that has been paid to somebody who knows nothing about it, *by* somebody who knows nothing about it, is in any way hush-money."

Whether you could or not, Lord Sedbergh was not prepared to say it. "No, no," he said comfortably, "you were quite right there, Edward. You acted honourably—nothing to reproach yourself with. But what an astonishing story it is! To think that we were wrong all the time! And Susan Clinton, of all people! Did you say she was hidden in the room when my wife was talking about the secret?"

His mind was running on details which had long ceased to occupy the Squire. His curiosity had to be satisfied to some extent, and his surprise vanquished, before he was ready to consider the story in its actual bearings. Without intending to add to the pangs of his friend, he made clear by the way he discussed it,

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the position that Susan must occupy in the view of anyone not influenced by the fact of relationship. She was the thief, found out and condemned, to the loss of all reputation and right of intercourse with her equals. So had Mrs. Amberley been condemned, by the self-protective code of society. The Squire saw Susan in Mrs. Amberley's place, more vividly and afflictively than he had seen her hitherto.

"She will be kept out of the way," he said, struggling against the hurt to his pride. "Humphrey is going to take her abroad. You don't think it is necessary for anyone else to know?"

"Oh no, no. Good heavens, no! What you have told me shall be kept absolutely sacred, Edward. I shouldn't breathe a word, or a hint, to any living soul."

The Squire breathed more freely. "We shall look after her," he said with a stronger feeling of the measure to be dealt out to the culprit than he had yet experienced. "She won't go scot-free. But exposure would bear so hard on the innocent—I couldn't have come to you, I believe—though I know it's the only right thing to do—if I hadn't been pretty sure that you would have felt that."

"Oh, of course, I feel it. It mustn't happen. It won't happen. It needn't happen."

"Thank you, Jim," said the Squire simply. "You were always a good friend of mine."

"Don't think any more of it, Edward. Lord, what a terrible time you must have gone through! Let's put it out of our minds, for good. You and I have

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done nothing wrong, at any rate. Why shouldn't we sustain ourselves with another——"

"There's a detail that has to be settled between us," interrupted the Squire, "before we can put it aside. What did you value that necklace at? Seven thousand pounds, wasn't it? I have been to my people this morning. I can let you have it within a week or ten days."

"That's a matter," said Lord Sedbergh after a pause of reflection, "that can only be considered with the help of some very old brandy. It hadn't occurred to me."

"Wonderful stuff this." Neither of them had spoken since the brandy had been ordered. "I don't believe you'll get anything like it anywhere else. Well now, my dear Edward, I think we shall have to leave that business alone."

"Oh, I couldn't do that. Humphrey doesn't want to, either. He mentioned it before I did. It is he who will pay it in the long run. That's only fair. But I can provide the money now, and he can't."

"Well, I don't want the money; and I'm glad to be in the position of being able to say so. What could I do with it? Buy another necklace? That would be running the risk of questions being asked that it might be difficult to answer."

"I don't think so. You are rich enough to be able to replace an heirloom—it was an heirloom, wasn't it?—and make up to your wife what has been lost, without occasioning remark. Oh, you must take the money, Jim. You're as generous as any man living—I know

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that. But the loss cannot fall on you, now it is known where the money went to. That poor misguided creature had it and spent it. It would be a burden on me all my life, if I couldn't put that right—and on Humphrey too. He would feel it as much as I should."

"I'm afraid you can't put it right," said Lord Sedbergh, speaking more seriously. "And it's a burden that you and Humphrey will have to shoulder. I'll do everything I can for you, Edward; but I won't carry that burden."

"What do you mean?" asked the Squire.

Lord Sedbergh did not speak for a moment. Then he looked up and asked, "What about Mrs. Amberley?"

The Squire frowned deeply. The question was a surprise to him. He had not thought much about Mrs. Amberley, except as an example of what Susan might be made to appear before the world.

"I ought to have told you how I regard that," he said unwillingly. "I didn't, because it seems to me perfectly plain, and I thought you would see it in the same light as I do."

Lord Sedbergh waited for him to explain the light in which he saw it.

"She isn't in prison any longer. They let her out, because she was ill—or so they said. She's as free as you or I. Nothing that could be done—somebody else suffering in the same way—would wipe out what she has already undergone—and done with. Besides, it *wasn't* on account of the necklace that she was sent to

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prison. It was on account of the other thing; and that she did steal."

"Yes, that's perfectly true. She has had no more than her deserts—rather less in fact. No, you couldn't reinstate her by publishing the truth."

"Well, then, what's the difficulty?"

"There's no difficulty, Edward, in my mind, about keeping quiet. It would be too much to expect any man in your situation to bring the heaviest possible misfortune on himself, and others, for the sake of doing justice to someone who could hardly benefit by it. At least that's how it seems to me."

"Justice!" echoed the Squire. "There's no question of justice. She was punished for something quite different. If she had been found guilty of stealing the necklace, and were still undergoing punishment for it, the whole question would be different altogether. Thank God, we haven't got to face that question. It would be terrible. As it has so mercifully turned out, no injustice is done to her at all. Can't you see that?"

"Well, do you think *she* would, if she were asked?"

Lord Sedbergh did not leave time for his question to sink in. "My dear fellow," he went on, "your course is as difficult as it could be. Who am I that I should put my finger on any one of its difficulties, and make it heavier? You have done nothing that I shouldn't have done myself if I had been in your place. At the same time, you have to take the responsibility for whatever you do, and I haven't."

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"Yes, I know that; and it's just what I want to do—put things right wherever I can."

"But you wouldn't be putting anything right by paying me money. You would only be making me share your difficulties—your great and very disagreeable difficulties; and that, with all the good will in the world towards you, my dear Edward, I won't do."

The Squire saw it dimly, and what he saw did not please him. Nor was his light enough to prevent him from pressing his point.

When Lord Sedbergh had combated it for some time, with firm good humour, he said more seriously, "Can't you see that if this story were ever to come out, and I had taken your money, I should be in a very awkward position?"

"It never will come out now."

"That's your risk, Edward. I may be a monster of selfishness, but I won't make it mine."

When the Squire left the club half-an-hour later, his face was not that of a man who had been set free of a debt of seven thousand pounds.

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CHAPTER IV

THIS OUR SISTER

"CLINTON. On the 16th inst. the Lady Susan Clinton, aged 28."

How could such an announcement, to the Squire reading it in the obituary column of his paper, cause any emotion stronger than the feeling that all was for the best?

For one thing, although the direct cause of Susan's death had been pneumonia, there was little doubt, to him who knew the state of mind she had been in when her illness had first attacked her, that she had succumbed to that, and not to any ailment of the body, which, otherwise, she could have shaken off. She had paid the price, poor girl! The account as against her was closed, her name dropped from the ledger.

That she had died in full repentance, and would therefore escape the ultimate fate of branded sinners, his easy creed allowed him to take for granted. The very fact that she *had* died seemed to make her state in the hereafter secure. For her it was well.

And not less so for those whom she had, in the phrase that came readily to his lips, left behind. Humphrey—poor Humphrey—who was overwhelmed with grief, as it was only natural he should be, would come

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to feel in time that her death had been, if not a blessing in disguise—which would be a harsh way of putting it—then a merciful dispensation of Providence. He had nothing to reproach himself with. He had cloven to his wife at a time when he might, justifiably, have played a very different part; had been prepared to share with her such of the punishment for her crime as could not be avoided; had even accepted—quixotically, as the Squire thought—part responsibility for it; and in short had fulfilled his duty towards her with a fine loyalty such as his father, remembering certain episodes in his career, had hardly thought to be in him. He had been tried as by fire, and had come well out of the ordeal, a better man in every way.

No, Humphrey had nothing to reproach himself with. Indeed, it would comfort him in the future to think that he had been tender to the poor girl in her disgrace, comforted her, been ready to throw over the life that suited him, so as to help her to recover herself, stood up for her, when she could not with reason be defended, been with her at the last, broken down when it was all over. His thoughts ran smoothly into the worn phrases apt to these sad occasions, when grief is subdued to not unpleasing melancholy, and melancholy is the shade of the tree of death, in which we are sitting for a time, but with the sunshine of life still before us.

Humphrey was still young. He could travel for a time, if he wanted to, or, perhaps better still, stay quietly at Kencote, until he had got over his loss; and

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then he could take up his life as before. When time had healed his wound he might even marry again. But that was to look too far ahead, with poor Susan not yet under the ground, and the Squire checked the thought at once. If she had lived he would certainly have had a very difficult time with her. A high resolve is one thing; the power to carry it out, day by day, when the exaltation in which it was made has faded away, is another. Humphrey was not trained to such efforts. He might have tired of it. Susan might have "broken out" again. All sorts of trouble might have arisen, which—well, which, by the mercy of Providence, it was not necessary now to conjecture. For Humphrey, all was for the best.

The Squire was glad, on his own account, that he had withdrawn his embargo upon Susan's visiting Kencote, before this had happened. He had been very near to imposing it again after his interview with Lord Sedbergh; but Susan had even then been dangerously ill; and the absorption caused by the rapid progress of her illness, and the contingent comings and goings, had fortunately taken his mind off the details of her past misdemeanour. He had been preserved—mercifully—from dealing his son that extra blow.

And yet he doubted whether he would have been able to play his part with her. It was plain now, whatever it had been when he had walked down the steps of Lord Sedbergh's club, that strong reproaches would not have helped matters; that nothing he had had it in his mind, then, to do or say to ease himself of the

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burden, whose weight his old friend had made him compute by refusing to touch it, would have lightened it; and that the effect of his knowledge would only have been to make things more difficult alike for himself and for Humphrey. His anger against the poor girl would be buried in her grave. It would not be difficult to speak of her now with that regretful affection that would be expected of him.

And her death made him less vulnerable. He perceived now, not without a shudder, that his safety depended upon the silence of a woman who, wherever the responsibility lay, had been bought, and might be bought again; or, if that were unlikely, might lightly let loose the hint which, gathering other hints to itself, would grow into the avalanche that would involve him in the disgrace he so much feared. But an accusation against a dead woman—if it were made it would be less readily believed, more reprehensible, easier to cast off. And Susan would not be there, a possible weakness to her own defence.

Here again he checked his thoughts. He was not ready to face a situation in which he would either have to deny untruthfully, or to keep damaging silence. But, certainly, for him, all was for the best.

Dick came in, as he was sitting with the paper on his knee. He wore a black tie, but was otherwise dressed as usual. His face was becomingly grave. They talked over details of the funeral. Susan was to be buried at Kencote, in the churchyard where so many generations of Clintons had been buried, her own dis-

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tant ancestors among them, but none within living memory who had not lived out the full tale of their years. Her body would lie in the church that night, and the house would fill up with many of those who would follow her to the grave on the morrow, including some members of her own family, all of whom the Squire disliked or was prepared to dislike. He ardently wished himself done with the painful ordeal. He doubted whether he would be able to acquit himself unremittingly in the manner that would be expected of him. He would have to wear a face of gloom, when he was already itching to be rid of these cheerless trailing postscripts to the message of death, and commit himself once more to the warm current of life. He would have to say so many things that he did not feel, and do so much that he hated doing.

The shadow, not of grief but of the adjuncts of grief, lay over the house, and darkened the bright June sunshine, or such of it as was allowed to filter through the blinded windows. Not for fifty years or more had such an assemblage been made at Kencote. The successive funerals of the Squire's six aunts, who had lived since his marriage at the Dower House, and the last of whom had died at another house in the village only two years ago, had been untroublous, not to say brisk, ceremonies, occasions of meeting between seldom-seen relations, and of hospitality almost festive, but tempered by affectionate reminiscence of the departed, and the feeling that one might talk naturally and freely, so long as one did not actually laugh. Ripe

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age had fallen on the rest laid up for it; there had been no occasion to feign deep sorrow.

But—"the Lady Susan Clinton, aged 28"!—there was material for sharp sorrow there; and the Squire was disturbed by the fear that he might not be able to show it; might even, if he were off his guard, show that he did not feel it.

"Did you hear from mother this morning?" asked Dick, when they had disposed of the details he had come to discuss.

"Yes. Humphrey is bearing up; but, of course, poor fellow, he can't get used to the idea yet. We must keep him here for a bit, after we rid the house of all these people; and he'll soon come round to himself."

"Was there any trouble between them latterly?" Dick asked, in a matter-of-fact voice, but gave the Squire time to collect his thoughts by going on immediately, "I don't want to pry into your affairs or his, but I had an idea that that business of Gotch's wasn't all he came to see you about the other day."

"Why do you think that?" asked the Squire with undiplomatic directness.

"Well—your going up to town with him the next day, for one thing. I only wanted to say that if it's a question of money again, which hasn't been put right by poor Susan's death, you can count on me for help if there's any difficulty in raising it."

What a good son this was—safe, level-headed, coolly and responsibly generous! The Squire would have

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given a good deal to have been released from his promise, and able to take him into full confidence then and there.

"Well," he said, "there *was* trouble about money, and I was prepared to find it, without interfering with estate affairs. That's why I didn't come to you. But the necessity is over now."

He mentally patted himself on the back for this masterpiece of statement, transgressing the strict truth by no more than perfectly allowable omission.

"Her settlement falls in, I suppose," said Dick. "I'm glad you were spared the worry, although the way out of it is sad enough. I've been sorry for Humphrey for some time. He had come to see that he had always played the fool about money, and was beginning to get his ideas straight; but poor Susan—well, one doesn't want to think about her in that way now—but there's no doubt she was a terrible drag on him. I'd seen it coming for some time, and when he talked to me at Christmas about settling down, I was pretty sure that he didn't know everything, and would be coming with another story soon."

"Why did you think that?" asked the Squire, with the sensation of treading on very thin ice.

"Oh, it was common talk of how she was going on—*had* been, I should say, for she did seem to have calmed down within the last year. Otherwise, I think I should have made up my mind to give Humphrey a hint, disagreeable as it would have been. Things were being hinted at about a year ago that made me think we

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might find ourselves involved in some bad scandal before we were much older."

"Oh, Dick," the Squire broke out, "we mustn't talk like this about a dead woman. Humphrey told me everything. It's all wiped out and done with now, for her, poor girl."

"Yes," said Dick. "But I'm not going to pretend that I think her death is a calamity. I don't; although any feeling one may have had against her is wiped out, as you say. In fact, if she had begun to pull herself up, as I think she had, and had got it all off her mind before she died, as I suppose she did, it's possible to feel kindly towards her. Still, I think she had made too big a mess of things. It would have come between them. As it is, he'll be able to think of her without bitterness. He'll get over the shock in time."

This was all so much what the Squire felt himself, summed up as it might have been in the comfortable phrase, "all for the best," that its effect upon him was much the same as if he had had the relief of telling Dick everything. He cheered up palpably, until he remembered what lay immediately in front of him; but faced even that with more equanimity, upheld by Dick's sympathetic support, and relieved of some doubt as to whether his thoughts about poor Susan were quite of the right colour.

The afternoon train, which in the course of these histories we have so often met at Kencote Station, brought the coffin and the mourners. Humphrey looked

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pale and worn, but collected. He stood with his mother's arm in his while the coffin, covered with flowers, was taken out of the purple-lined van, and lifted on to a hand bier. The church was much nearer to the station than the house, and the little procession walked there, past the cottages with blinds all drawn, and the villagers standing by them, mostly in black, which only served to heighten the bright colours of the flowers with which the gardens were full. The sky was of the purest blue, and larks trilled unseen in its translucent vapours, as if to draw the thoughts of the mourners away from the earth in which they were presently to see these mortal remains laid. The elms and chestnuts whispered of life going on and renewing itself year by year until the end. The rich springing growth of early summer in this quiet country village spoke of life and of hope; and the black line of mourners moving slowly along was not incongruous with it, if the poor clay they were escorting was really only the husk from which new life had already sprung.

The Squire, sobered to becoming gravity by the sight of the coffin, yet felt his thoughts tuned to the beauty of the sky and the familiar surroundings. It was he who had planned this walking escort. There would be carriages, and a state suitable to the occasion on the morrow. This was to be a home-coming, a token of his forgiveness of her for the trouble she had caused him, a sort of last taste of the everyday life of Kencote, into the intimacy of which she was finally to be received as a daughter of the house. It appealed

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also to that sense of common human life, which is the fine flower of squiredom. Death levels all; he had no feeling that the cottagers standing at their garden gates were intruding their curiosity, as was felt by Susan's mother for one, who thought this public tramp between a station and a church an outrage on her nobility. The cottagers were his friends on an occasion like this, had a right to share mourning as well as festival with the family in whose interests they were hereditarily bound up. He took comfort from seeing them there. They were his people; without them this quiet home-coming would have been incomplete.

The coffin was taken into the chancel of the ancient church, and set down over the brass of a knightly Clinton who had died and been buried there five centuries before. Almost without exception those who followed it were his direct descendants, and the same stones surrounded them as had sheltered the mourners at his funeral. So many years, so little change! Christening, marriage, burial—the renewal of life in the same stock had gone on through the centuries. This new burial was only a ripple in the steady, pauseless flow, and would have been no more if the head of the house himself had lain where this poor, foolish, erring girl, now hardly regretted, and soon to be forgotten, was laid.

A few prayers were said, and a hymn sung, and then she was left to lie there alone. Shafts of sunlight would slant across the stones, and fading, give place to twilight, then to dusk, then to darkness. The church

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would be very still. Dawn would come, with the sweet twittering of birds, and the sun would once more strike through the armorial glass of the East window, and paint stone and timber with bright colour; and still she would be lying there, dead to the glory of a new day as she had been dead to the darkness of the night. Nothing would matter to her any more. In a little while her dust would mingle with that of long generations of Clintons forgotten, and her memory would pass away as theirs had passed. Her life had been everything to her, her wants and hopes and regrets the centre of her being. Now it was as if it had never been—for her, lying in the still church.

But her acts lived. The ripples she had caused in the pond of life would spread, intersecting other ripples caused by other acts, until they reached the border.

When they had returned to the house Nancy went up with Joan into her room—the room in which they had slept side by side for all but a few nights in their lives until Nancy's marriage. There was only one bed in the room now.

"How odd it looks!" said Nancy. "Do you miss me, my precious old Joan?"

"Of course I do," said Joan. "I had to make them take your bed out. It made me feel so horribly lonely."

"If John is ever unkind to me," said Nancy, "I shall come here and have it put back."

She checked herself. No vestige of a joke was to be allowed until after to-morrow. She thought herself unfeeling for even inclining to light speech. To her

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and Joan the death of someone not much older than themselves was a startling thing; and the death of anyone so close to them, in their inexperience of death, would have subdued them for a time.

"Let's go and talk in the schoolroom," Nancy said. "Nobody will come there."

They sat together on the old comfortable sofa, arms entwined. The absence of sentiment with which they had been accustomed to treat one another had given place to frequent signs of affection. They had hardly been more together during their childhood than since Nancy had come to Kencote after her honeymoon the day before. Their stream of talk flowed unceasingly. Oceans of separate experience had to be bridged.

Now they put aside for a time their own affairs of the past and future, and talked about the immediate present.

"Did you speak to Humphrey?" Joan asked. "I didn't; but I thought he looked awful."

"He kissed me when we came in," said Nancy, "and said he was glad I had come back in time. He spoke much the same as usual, but went away directly. Joan, how awful he must be feeling! Just think what John would feel if he were to lose me!"

"You haven't been married so long," said Joan; but immediately added, "I suppose that wouldn't make any difference, though. I do feel frightfully sorry for Humphrey. I almost think it would have been better if the funeral had been at once, instead of making it like two. It must be awful for him to think of her

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lying there all alone in the church. You know, Uncle Tom wanted to have tapers and somebody to watch; but father wouldn't."

"No; I didn't know that. Why?"

"He said candles were Roman Catholic; and that there would be nobody who wanted to watch. I think he was right there. You know, Nancy, I think the saddest thing about it is that there is nobody who is very sorry for poor Susan's death—except Humphrey. I don't think her own people are. None of them looked it."

"Lady Aldeburgh cried."

"She pretended to. Her eyes were quite dry."

"I liked Susan. So did you."

"Yes, in a way. Perhaps not very much. I wish I had liked her more, now. I *am* sorry, of course. But I feel much more glad at having you again, than sorry because she is dead."

Nancy gave her a squeeze. "I can't realise that she is dead," she said, "that she was in that coffin. I felt just a little bit like choking when Uncle Tom read that part about a place of rest and peace. It was so dreadful to think of her being dead; but that seemed to alter it all. If she is somewhere alive still—and happy!"

"Yes," said Joan seriously. "I hope Humphrey is thinking about that."

On the morrow there was a difficult time to get through before the funeral, at twelve o'clock. The Squire took the "Times" into his room when it came,

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but only glanced over it, standing up. He made occasion to go to the Rectory, and to the Dower House, and spent some little time at each; and the hour came round.

It was over quickly. The large company walked and drove back to the house, which stood once more normally unshuttered, and ate and drank. There was a buzz of conversation in the crowded dining-room, which at times swelled beyond the limits of strict propriety, and suddenly subsided, only to rise and sink again.

Departures began to be taken. This was the hardest time for the Squire to go through, for he had to say something in answer to the words of each. The end came with a rush, when most of those who had been staying in the house, with those who had come down that morning, left to take the special train back to London.

When the last carriage had departed the Squire turned back into the hall with a great sigh of relief. He went into his room and stood by the open window, breathing deeply of the soft summer air, as if his lungs had been cleared of some obstacle. "Well, that's over," he said aloud as he turned away.

The sound of his words checked him. He went to the window again, and looked across the garden and the park to where the church tower showed between the trees. "Poor girl!" he said slowly. And then, after a pause, "Poor dear girl!"

This satisfied him, and he went briskly to the table where the newspapers were laid in order.

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BOOK IV

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CHAPTER I

A RETURN

THE Squire shut to the gate in the garden wall of the Dower House and stepped out across the park. His face was lit up with gratification, his step was as light as that of an elderly man of seventeen stone very well could be.

He had been to see Virginia, and she had given him the news that had caused this elation.

She had just come down from Scotland, where John Spence had taken a moor, leaving Dick amongst the grouse. Mrs. Clinton was there too, and Joan, and a large house-party besides. The Squire had been asked, but it was many years since the twelfth had caused a stir in his movements, and he had refused. Didn't care much about it; might come to them later, when they moved down, for the pheasants. It was a not unpleasant change for him to have the house entirely to himself. But he had got a little tired of his solitary condition after a fortnight, and had been extremely glad to see Virginia, who had come South to meet a friend on her way from America to Switzerland.

It seemed that young Inverell—the Earl of Inverell, twenty-seven years of age, master of mines as well as acres, handsome and amiable as well as high-principled—in fact the very type and picture of young Earls—

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whose Highland property marched with that which John Spence had rented, had been constantly of their party, even to the extent of putting off one of his own.

The attraction? Joan.

There could be no doubt about it, Virginia had said. He was head over ears. And Joan was as gay as a lark. It was the sweetest thing to see them together—a picture of adorable youth, and love, unspoken as yet, but shining out of their eyes and ringing in their laughter for everyone to see and hear.

She had enlarged on the enchanting spectacle, and the Squire had listened to her tale, not so much because he "cared about that sort of thing," but so as to assure himself that it was undoubtedly a true one, on both sides, and that Joan, especially, would not be likely to rebel a second time.

How providentially things worked out! Young Inverell was a *parti* beside whom the eligibility of Bobby Trench paled perceptibly. Bobby Trench, socially and financially, would have been a good match. This would be a great one. If it would not "lift" the Clintons of Kencote, which the Squire was persuaded no marriage whatever could do, it would at least point their retiring worth. It would bring them into that prominence in which, to speak truth, they had always been somewhat lacking.

And he was a nice young fellow too, so the Squire had always heard; already beginning modestly to play the part in public affairs which was expected of the head of his house; untouched as yet by the staleness of

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the world, which had touched Bobby Trench so much to the Squire's disgust, until he had closed his senses to it; and a fitting mate in point of youth and good looks for a beautiful young girl like Joan, which Bobby Trench could hardly have been said to be, in spite of his ever youthful behaviour.

Really, it was highly gratifying. It just showed that there was no need to hurry these things. If Joan had taken the first person that came along—a young fellow he had never thought much of himself, but had allowed to take his chances out of old friendship to his father—she would have missed this. The child was a good child. She would do credit to any station. Countess of Inverell! Nothing in that, of course, but—well, really the whole thing was highly gratifying.

Why hadn't his wife written about it?

There was nothing in that. She always left out of her letters the things she might have known he would like to hear. Virginia was quite certain; and she could be trusted on such a subject, or indeed on any.

Well, one got through one's troubles. It was extraordinary how sunshine came after rain, or would be if one didn't believe in a wise Providence overruling everything for our good. A few months ago there had been that terrible affair, now buried and forgotten——

The brightness left his face as his thoughts touched on that subject. It was buried, sadly, though perhaps mercifully, enough; but it was not forgotten. It was thought of as little as possible, but the debt still rankled—the debt that could not be paid. It came up

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at nights, when sleep tarried, which fortunately happened seldom. But time was adjusting the burden. It would not be felt much longer.

The thought of it now came only as a passing shadow to heighten the sunshine of the present. In fact this gleam of sunshine seemed to remove the shadow finally. He had done all that he could do, had kept back nothing, had satisfied his honour. An obligation to so old a friend as Sedbergh need not weigh on any man.

It would be ungrateful not to recognise how plainly things had been "ordered." Apart from the curious accidents of the problem—the fact that "the woman" had not been condemned for *that* crime; that she had already paid her penalty; that the other woman had been connected in such a way that it had been possible to silence her by a perfectly innocent transaction, carried out by perfectly innocent people—facts surely beyond coincidence, and of themselves demanding belief in an overruling Providence—apart from all this there had been poor Susan's death, no longer demanding the least pretence of lamentation, but to be regarded as a clear sign that the account had been squared and no further penalty would be exacted.

And now there was this new satisfaction, as a further most bountiful token of favour. How was it possible that there could be those who did not believe in a God above, when signs were so plain to those who could read them? It would be churlish now not to throw off all disagreeable thoughts of the past, and not to take full pleasure in the brightness of present and future.

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As the Squire came round a group of shrubs that masked the lawn from the carriage drive he saw a woman approaching the house. As he caught sight of her she caught sight of him, changed her course, and came towards him.

He stopped short with a gasp of dismay. It was Mrs. Amberley.

"Mr. Clinton," she said, "I have never had the pleasure of meeting you, but I expect you know who I am. I have come down from London on purpose to have a little talk with you."

She had altered in no way that he could have described. She was fashionably dressed, in a manner suitable for the country, her wonderful hair had not lost its lustre, her face was still the beautiful mask of whatever lurked in secret behind it. Yet she seemed to him a thing of horror, degraded and stained for all the world to see. And even the world might have been aware of some subtle change. Whether it was that her neat boots were slightly filmed with dust, or that her clothes, smart as they were, were not of the very latest; or that it was no outward sign, but the consciousness of disgrace affecting her bearing, however she might try to conceal it—whatever it was, it was there. This was a woman who had come down very low, knew that the world was against her, and would fight the world with no shame for what it could still withhold from her.

He stared at her open-mouthed, unable for the moment either to speak or think.

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She laughed at him elaborately. "You don't seem very pleased to see me," she said. "May we go into the house and sit down? I have walked from the station, and am rather tired."

"No," he said quickly, reacting to his immediate impulse. "You will not enter my house."

She looked at him with careful insolence. "Shall we go into the churchyard?" she said, "and talk over Susan Clinton's grave?"

The infamous taunt brought him to himself. "Come this way," he said, and turned his back on her to stride off along a path between the shrubs.

She followed him for a few steps, and then, feeling probably that this rapid progress in his wake did not accord with her dignity, stopped and said, "Where are you taking me to, please? I haven't come here to look at your garden."

He turned sharply and faced her. "I am taking you to where we can be neither seen nor heard," he said, and waited for her to speak.

"Very well," she said. "That will suit me very well—for a *first* conversation—as long as it is not too far, and I am not expected to race there."

He turned his back on her and went on again, but at a slower pace. They went through a thick shrubbery and out on to a little sloping lawn at the edge of the lake, which was entirely surrounded by great rhododendrons. There was a boat-house here, and a garden seat, to which he motioned her.

She sat down, and looked up at him. "I am not

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going to talk to you standing over me like that," she said. "It will be giving you an unfair advantage."

He sat down on the same seat, as far away from her as possible.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" she asked him, in much the same tone as a schoolmaster might have asked the question of an errant schoolboy.

He said nothing. He had nothing to say. His thoughts were still in a turmoil.

Perhaps silence was the best retort to her air of insolence. She had to find another opening.

"You call yourself a man of honour!" she said in a slow contemptuous voice. "You pay hush-money, so that the innocent may suffer, and the guilty go free."

"It's a lie," he said. "I paid no money. I refused to pay money."

"Ah, then you did know everything. It was what I could not be quite certain about. The story was confused. Thank you for clearing it up."

He felt himself trapped at the first opening of his mouth. He would need all his wits to cope with this shameless, cunning woman. He tried to break through her deliberate artifices. "What do you want?" he asked. "What have you come here for?"

"You didn't pay the money yourself?" she went on. "That would hardly have done, would it? You let somebody else pay it, and washed your hands of it, I suppose."

It had been his own phrase. Her chance lighting

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on it seemed to make her uncannily aware of everything that had passed. How had she got hold of her information? He had not had time to think about that yet.

"I refused to pay anything," he repeated. "Nothing was paid to anybody who had anything to do with you. I refuse to discuss these affairs with you."

"Oh, do you?" she taunted him. "Will you refuse to discuss them when you are brought up on a charge of conspiracy? You will be allowed to do it through Counsel, of course. They allowed *me* Counsel, when I was brought up on a charge of stealing something that a member of your family stole. I wish I could have done without him. I should have liked to defend myself. But it will suit *you*. You can shelter behind him. You seem rather good at that."

"What do you want?" he asked her again. "What have you come here for?"

"To talk it over quietly," she said, with the same mocking intonation. "Do you want to know how I found out about it all? You seem to have forgotten entirely that I *knew* that somebody staying in the house at the same time that I was must have stolen the things. It wasn't very difficult, afterwards, to decide on the thief. I have a few friends still, Mr. Clinton, and I heard that your precious Susan, whom every one knew to have been head over ears in debt, had suddenly and miraculously become out of debt, and had money to throw about. I had enquiries made, and heard that the woman whom you bought—I beg your pardon, whom you made somebody else a cat's-

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paw to buy, so as to save your own skin, had been sent over to the other side of the water, to get her out of the way. It was the finger of Providence, I think, that led me to follow her up. I expect you have been thinking that Providence had been specially engaged in *your* interests; and it certainly did look like it—for a time."

Again the uncanny cognisance of his very thoughts! But this was only a very clever woman, who knew her man, and his type.

"I went over myself, and found her," she went on. "She was going West to make a start on the money that her poor fool of a husband thought had been given him for his own sweet sake. She didn't intend to undeceive him. At one time I had had an idea of going 'West' myself. You see I had been hounded out of London for the crime that one of you Clintons had committed, and as you had so chivalrously left me to bear the burden of it, and hushed up the truth, instead of clearing my name, I didn't know then that I should be able to come back again. I wanted to get away as far as possible."

He was unendurably taunted. "Your name couldn't have been cleared," he said. "You were not condemned for that; it was for stealing the other thing; and that will stick to you still."

She affected bewilderment, and then enlightenment seemed to come to her, and she laughed. "Oh, that's it, is it?" she said. "Your mind seems to run so much in twists and curves that anyone who expects

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a straight sense of right and wrong in honourable men must be pardoned for being a little slow in following them. But I didn't steal that either, you know. The sainted Susan stole it as well as the necklace—she was an expert in such things—and this woman Clark told *my* woman about it—the one who committed perjury at my trial, and is now going to suffer for it, if I can find her."

The sneer at the dead girl pierced something in him which set his brain clear. This was a wicked woman, and she was lying to him. "That's a likely story!" he said with rough contempt, and she winced for the first time, although, with his eyes on the ground, he did not mark it.

"It is one that will keep for the present," she said, instantly recovering her coolness. "Well, fortunately I was able to make friends with Susan's maid. It is a way I have with that sort of person, although it is true that my own brute of a woman gave me away."

"Yes, she gave you away," said the Squire, more quick-witted than ordinarily.

"Lied about me, I ought to have said," she corrected herself, with a blink of the eyelids. "I see I must be careful to choose my words. Words mean so much with you, don't they? Acts so little. If you can *say* you haven't paid a bribe, it doesn't in the least matter that you have let it be done and taken advantage of it. Well, I made friends with her to begin with. She had just heard of Susan's death and wanted to

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talk about it. She couldn't keep her foolish mind off the connection between me and Susan, and spoke in such a way that I soon knew I had been right to follow her up. I drew her on—I have always been considered rather clever, you know—and before she knew she had done it she had let out her story. You may be sure I frightened her, when I could safely do so, into telling me the whole of it. I heard what a fright dear Humphrey was in—a nice young man that—came to my trial, I believe, jingling the stolen money in his pocket."

"That's not true," said the Squire. "He knew nothing of it whatever."

"He may have told you so. But six or seven thousand pounds! To repeat your own words: 'That's a likely story, isn't it?'"

"He didn't know. You can go on."

"Thank you. I heard how he came posting down here, to get the hush-money; and how it came by return of post—telegraph, I believe; I think he telegraphed to the woman, 'Blackmail will be paid,' I suppose, 'on condition do not say from father.'"

She laughed at her jest. The Squire kept miserable silence.

"Well, there it is," she said. "To use my words more carefully this time—she gave you away. You never thought you could be given away, did you? You thought you were safe. Your conscience hasn't troubled you much, I should think, to judge by your healthy appearance. Conscience never does trouble

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cowards much, when they can once assure themselves they won't be found out."

In the turbulent confusion of his mind, the Squire still clung to certain fixities. He had acted for the best; he had acted so that the innocent should not suffer; and if he himself had been amongst the innocent who were to escape suffering, his own safety had not been his chief thought. And if his actions, or his refraining from action, had added to the burden justly borne by the guilty, that had been inevitable if the innocent were to be saved; in any case it had added so little that he could not be blamed for ignoring it. Cowardice at least, he had thought, was no crime that could ever be laid to his charge, and he had not shown it when he had braved all consequences in refusing to lift a finger to avert the disaster that was now, in spite of all, threatening him.

But she was dragging from him all his armour, piece by piece. He let it go, and clung to his naked manhood.

"You may say what you like," he said, squaring himself and looking out over the water in front of him. "I simply stood aside. What could you—no, not you, what could anyone—have expected me to do? Publish the truth—overwhelm the innocent with the guilty; and all for what? For nothing. You were free. You——"

"Free! Yes. They had let me out of prison, that's quite true. Would *you* consider yourself free with that taint hanging over you? Was I free to come back

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to my friends? Was I free even to settle down anywhere where my story was known? Susan, the thief, was to be sheltered, because she bore the honoured name of Clinton. *She* was to go free. Yes. But *I*, who had taken her punishment, was to be left to bear the bitter results of it all my life. What meanness! What base cowardice!"

He hardened himself, but said nothing.

"Susan had stolen this necklace, worth thousands of pounds," she went on. "She had——"

"But not the jewel that you were imprisoned for stealing," he put in again.

"I have already told you that she did; and I can prove it by that woman's evidence."

He wavered, but stuck to his point. "I don't believe it," he said, "and you can leave it out."

"I will, because it doesn't really matter whether you believe it or not. You will believe it when you see her in the witness-box."

"You won't get her into the witness-box, to swear to that."

"Well, we shall see. There's no sense in haggling with you over that. We will leave it out, as you advised. I was talking about Susan. She and your precious Humphrey had spent the money that they had got from the sale, or pawning, or whatever it was, of the pearls she had stolen."

"I have already said," he interposed quietly, "that Humphrey knew nothing of it."

"And I have already said, 'That's a likely story!'

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However, we need not press the point now. Say *she* had had all the money if you like, and that he—dear innocent—never noticed that she was spending some thousands of pounds more than he allowed her. If you like to believe that it's your affair; we shall have plenty of opportunities of judging what view other people will take of it, by and by. At any rate, the money was spent—the stolen money—and you, a rich man, can sit down quietly and let somebody else bear the loss of it."

He knew he was giving himself into her hands, but he could not help himself. "That's not true," he said.

She looked at him, her lip curling. "Oh! you sent it back—anonymously perhaps. You did have that much honesty."

"You can make what use of the admission you like," he said. "I told Lord Sedbergh the story, and offered him the money."

This set her a little aback. "*He* knows the truth, then," she exclaimed. "Another man of honour! *He* lets me lie under the stigma of having stolen something that he's got the price of in his pocket all the time. Upon my word! You're a pretty pair! I'm not certain that he's not worse than you are."

He struggled with himself, but only for a moment, and then said, "He refused to take the money."

She was quick to take that up. "Oh! I see. Dear me, how I should have enjoyed being present at that

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interview. You go to him with the delightful proposal that he shall make himself party to your meanness, and he refuses. Yes. I suppose he would. I've no reason to suppose there are *two* men of supposed honour who could act quite as vilely as you have done. Come now, Mr. Clinton, I've given you a piece of gratuitous information. Supposing you return it by telling me what he said to you. Did he tell you what he really thought of you, or only hint it?"

"Oh, let's have an end of this," he said, with agonised impatience. "What have you come here for? What do you want?"

Her manner changed. "Yes, we will have an end of it," she said, with quick scorn. "It's useless to tell you what I think of your meanness, and how I despise your cowardice. I should have respected you much more if you had paid your blackmail down like a man, and then kept quiet about it, instead of running snivelling about trying to salve your own conscience. But a man who can believe as you have has no shame. You can't touch him by showing him up to himself. You can, though, by making him pay for it. And I'm going to make *you* pay—to the last rag of reputation you've got left."

She clenched her fist, and bent towards him fiercely. On his fathomless trouble her change of attitude made no new impression. What mattered it whether she sneered or stormed? The truth would be known; the pit of disgrace was already yawning for him.

"I can't touch Susan," she went on. "If I could,

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I'd drag her out of her grave and set her up for all the world to mock at."

The intensity with which she said this affected him not merely to horror. He began to see dimly what an adversary he had to cope with, and the burning rage against circumstance that must consume her. Even if all he had comforted himself with was true—if she was guilty of stealing the diamonds, and had suffered for that alone—still, she had suffered for Susan's crime. For if Susan had been found out, she would, or might, have gone undetected. How that knowledge must smoulder or blaze in her mind, night and day—all the worse if she was partly guilty! He might expect no mercy from her.

"I *will* make her name a mockery," she cried, "and I'll make yours stink in the nostrils of every decent honest man and woman in the country. I've only to tell my story. You can't deny it; you won't be allowed to. But I'll do more than that. I'll make you stand where I stood; first in the police court, then in the dock—you and Humphrey together, and your other son too and his wife, who paid the money. Tell your story *then*, and see what's thought of you! Some of them may get off—but *you* won't. You'll go where I went—to a vile and horrible prison, where you'll be with the scum of the earth; where you'll have plenty of time to think it all over, and whether it wouldn't have been better for you, after all, to tell the truth and shame the devil,—you dastardly coward!"

Her voice had risen almost to a shriek. He looked

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round him, in fear that it would bring someone to the scene. But the lake was retired, and seldom visited. They were quite alone.

"Yes, I suppose you would like to move away," she said in a voice more controlled, but still quivering with rage. "You can't run away. You'll have to face it now; you and your whole family, guilty and innocent. I'll make you suffer through them, as well as in yourself. You'll never wipe off the blot, never in all your life, not even when you come out of prison and come back here—a man that nobody will speak to again, for all your wealth and position. You can think of that when you're in your cell. They give you plenty of time to think. It's not more than *I* suffered; it's not so much, because I was innocent. But I'd no children and grandchildren to make it worse. You have. It's your *name* you've blackened. Clinton will mean thief, and conspirator, and everything that's vile long after *you* are dead."

He had heard enough. He got up, turned his back on her, and began to walk very slowly across the little lawn, his head bent. She watched him with a look of hate, which gradually faded to scorn, then to cunning, then to expectation. But it became dismay when, having crossed the grass, he did not turn, but kept on between the shrubs, as if he had forgotten her, and were going to leave her there alone.

She had to call to him. "Where are you going?"

He turned at once, and the look on his face might have made her pity him, if she had had any pity in her.

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"You must do what you will," he said. "There is nothing more to be said."

Then he turned from her again, and pursued his slow, contemplative walk along the path, his shoulders bent, his steps dragging a little, like those of an old man.

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CHAPTER II

PAYMENT

SHE forced a laugh. "Oh, there's a lot more to be said," she called after him, in a voice almost gay. "Please come back."

He took no notice of her, but went on.

She sprang up, a look of alarm on her face, and took a few quick steps across the grass.

"Mr. Clinton!" she said. "Mr. Clinton! I have a proposal to make to you."

He stopped and turned then. She expected him to come back on to the lawn; but he stood still, and she had to go up the path to him.

She lifted her face, that some men, but not he, would have called beautiful, to his, and smiled.

"It needn't happen, you know," she said.

He did not understand in the least, and looked his puzzlement—and his disgust of her. She dropped her eyes, and her seductive manner at the same time. "Come and sit down again," she said, "and let us talk sensibly. I have worked off my anger. Now let us see what can be done."

A slight gleam of hope came to him. Perhaps—now Susan was dead—she would see . . . she could gain nothing. . . .

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He followed her to the seat obediently, and sat down.

"I have told you what I think of you," she said, speaking now coolly and evenly. "I had to do that to clear my mind. You have treated me with the meanest cruelty, and I mean every word I have said to you. I have suffered bitterly, and perhaps I have succeeded in showing you that I have it in my power to make you suffer in the same way. Revenge is very sweet, and I have tasted a little of it. But, after all, it can't do away with the past; and its savour soon goes. I shan't gain much by punishing you, though you ought to be punished."

"No," he said eagerly. "You can gain nothing. And look at the terrible—awful suffering you would bring upon those who are innocent of any offence against you."

"Quite so," she said coolly. "I am glad you realise that. I meant you to."

"It would be inhuman," he went on. "You would never be forgiven for it—in this world or the next."

She laughed, this time without affectation. "You are really rather funny," she said. "Well now, what do you suggest? That I shall hold my tongue and go away? Back to America, for instance, and settle down there for good, perhaps under another name?"

He could hardly believe his ears. "You would do that?" he cried.

"I think perhaps I might be persuaded to. I am not unreasonable."

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"If you did that," he broke out, his face aflame, "the blessing of the innocent would be yours to the end of your life. You would be their saviour; you——"

"I suppose I should," she interrupted dryly. "I should like that. But the trouble is, you see, that one can't live on the blessing of the innocent. It isn't sustaining enough. And I have very little to live on."

The light died slowly out of his face as he listened to her.

"You must help me," she said. "You are a rich man, and you can do it. You allowed money to be paid before, to hush up this scandal; you offered a very large sum of money to free yourself of a mere disagreeable feeling of indebtedness, and took some risk in doing it too—I give you that much justice. I am glad Lord Sedbergh refused that money. Now you can lend it to me—I will pay you back some day—and a few thousands more. Let me have ten thousand pounds, Mr. Clinton. You can ease your conscience of the wrong you have done me, and save your innocents at the same time—yourself, who are not innocent, into the bargain."

Perhaps she had mistaken the motives which had led him to refuse to pay money to Gotch, and really thought that he had done it only to save his own skin, knowing that it would be paid elsewhere; in which case nothing in this proposal would shock him. Or perhaps she relied overmuch on having frightened him

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into acquiescence with any proposal. Otherwise, with all her powers of finesse, she would hardly have plumped out her demand in this careless fashion.

She had restored him in some degree to himself. "What!" he cried, his brows terrifically together. "After all you have said, you now want me to pay blackmail to *you*. It's an impudent proposal; and I refuse it."

She was quick to see her error. If he wanted his susceptibilities soothed, she was quite ready to do that.

"Oh, don't be absurd," she said. "I never really thought that you had looked on that transaction as blackmail; I only said so because I wanted to make you smart. Is it likely that I should be fool enough to suggest such a thing to you? Besides, whatever you may think of me, I am not a blackmailer; it wouldn't suit my book. You are not very clever, you know, Mr. Clinton. I will tell you what I want, and why I think you ought to help me to get it, as carefully as I can; and you must listen to me and try and understand it."

Poor man! How could he help listening to her, with so much at stake!

"The mischief is done," she said. "I am innocent, but I am smirched—poor me!—and although I could make you suffer, and would, I tell you frankly, if I could do it without hurting myself, I don't believe I could ever get back—not all the way. I don't know that I want to try; I am not young now, whatever I look, and I have no heart for the struggle. I am

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young enough, at any rate, to enjoy my life, if I can begin it again, in quite new surroundings, and not dogged by poverty. It isn't much I want. What is ten thousand pounds for life to a woman like me, who has spent that in a year? I have something of my own, but not much. This would make me secure against that horrible wolf at the door, which frightens me more than anything."

He was about to speak, but she silenced him with a lift of the hand, and said, "Let me go on, please. Why should *you* give it to me? you were going to ask—I drop the pretence of a loan, though you can call it that if you like. Because you are the only person I can ask it of. It is compensation; and nobody but you—except Humphrey, of course—has offended against me. Sedbergh *thinks* I stole the star, and so does Mary Sedbergh, and it is true that that is all I was actually found guilty of. Under the circumstances they are not to be blamed. The coincidences—and the perjury—were too strong for me. They owe me nothing—except out of kindness to an old friend whom they had done injustice to."

"If you want me to listen to you in patience," said the Squire angrily, "you'll drop that impudent pretence of not having stolen the star. My daughter saw you at the cupboard; and you would have stolen the necklace if you could. You hardly take the trouble to hide that you're lying. You must take me for a fool."

"Shall I drop it?" she asked. "I think perhaps I

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will, with you. It is quite safe. I can take it up again if you drive me to action; and nobody will believe that I could have been such a fool as to admit to you that I had stolen it."

"You infamous creature!" he cried. "That was the plea you used before. It didn't save you, and it won't save you this time."

She saw that she had made a mistake, but answered, "Well, no; perhaps it wouldn't save me. But you see the question wouldn't arise. If I did take it, I couldn't be punished for taking it twice. I could confess it to all the world now, and nothing further would happen. Besides, you see, it will be *you* who will be standing in the dock, for an offence into which the question of the star wouldn't come."

His eyes dropped. Her specious reasoning—before she had made the mistake of interrupting it with her insolent cynicism—had made some way with him, and allowed his mind to detach itself ever so little from that frightful picture.

"Oh, you can't be prepared to face that," she said, pursuing her recovered advantage; "and it would be too absurd—quixotic. The same reasons hold good here as they did before, when you allowed silence to be kept, and were prepared to pay not much less than I ask for. You save your children as well as yourself. Think what it would mean for that young girl of yours, when the time came for her to be married."

Ah! That was a sharper pang than she knew. Oh, for the sunny satisfaction of that walk across the park

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back again! And the sun shining now on his black misery had only shifted a point or two.

"And the other one," went on the cool voice, "who was married the other day. Their father in the dock! in prison!"

He rallied again. "You can drop that nonsense too," he said. "It's a bogy that doesn't frighten me."

"Not the dock? I admit that you *might* escape the prison—though Humphrey couldn't very well."

"Whatever mistake I may have made—and I'm not yet prepared to admit that I made any—I did nothing that I could be even asked to justify in a court of law."

"Well, I think you're wrong there. But in any case you would fear the court of your friends and neighbours and the whole public opinion of England hardly less than a court of law, wouldn't you?"

This was so true that he showed his sense of it in his face.

"Oh, my dear good man, how can you be so foolish as to run the risk of it? Look here, Mr. Clinton, supposing I admit the theft of the star, and say that I have deserved what I got for that, do I *really* suffer nothing whatever by bearing the burden of Susan's far bigger theft all my life? Be honest now. Take it as a woman's weakness. Wouldn't it mean a good deal to me to be cleared of that?"

She waited for his answer, which was slow in coming. He fought hard against his inclination to give an evasive one. "Yes—it might—it would," he said.

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"Then I bear it, and save her name, now she is dead; and your name. I save the honour of you Clintons, who think so much of yourselves. If I do that, and allow the shame you have fastened on to me to rest where it is, don't I deserve some little kindness from you—some help in the life I shall have to live, right away from all that has ever made my life worth living to me before, right away from all my friends? I should get *some* of them back, you know, if it were known that *that*, at least, wasn't true of me."

Her voice was pleading. It affected him no more than by the sense of the words it carried. Perhaps if this had been her tone from the first it might have done so.

But the words themselves did affect him. They were true. If it could be regarded as only help that she wanted!

"This time," she said, "you wouldn't be doing injury to a living soul. You would only be doing something towards setting right a wrong. You wouldn't even be doing anything that the law would blame you for. Susan is dead. There is nobody who could be prosecuted."

"I could pay Sedbergh his money," he said slowly.

"Yes, you could do that," she took him up eagerly. "Honourably, now. He could take it without any scruple. The Sedberghs would be sorry for me, I think. They would be glad that I had been helped. *They* couldn't blame you. And who else could?"

The Squire knitted his brows hard, and tried to think,

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but couldn't. He could only feel. Release might be in view from the chains that already seemed to have begun to rust on him.

"I can't see my way," he said. "I must think it over."

With her eyes fixed sharply and anxiously on him, she had seemed to be reading his very thoughts. She had influenced him; she could do nothing more by repetition of her plea; he must have time to think it over—and *would* have time, whatever she might say; he was that sort of man.

She rose from the seat. "I know you must have time," she said. "I know that the sum I ask for is a large one, especially if you are going to add another seven thousand on to it; but I can't take less. I won't take less. But remember what it buys you, Mr. Clinton, when you think it over. If you refuse me this money which you owe me for what you have done to me, if ever man owed woman anything, I shall speak out and bring it home to you. I would rather have peace for the rest of my days, and ease, than perpetual fighting. But I shall be ready to fight, if you refuse me, for I shall get *something* out of that."

He rose too. "You needn't go over all that again," he said. "If I consider it right to do this I will do it. If not, no threats will weigh with me."

"Very well," she said. "If you accept, as of course you will, for it *is* right to do it, you will want to see me again to settle details. Probably you won't want to pay the money all at once, and we can arrange

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that. You will want to be assured that I shan't come down on you again, that my silence will be absolutely unbroken. I can satisfy you as to that too; I have thought out a way. There will be other details to settle. You won't want to see me down here again. You must come to see me in London. I will help you in every way I can."

She gave him an address.

"Now I will go," she said. "Show me a way out without my passing the house."

They walked round the lower end of the lake together, neither of them speaking a word. He took her to a gate leading into a lane. "If you follow that to the left," he said, "you will come to the village."

She went through the gate which he held open for her. Then she turned and looked at him out of level eyes, and said before she walked away: "If you do what I ask, you will hear nothing more of me after we have settled matters. If you don't, I will punish you somehow—in addition—for not receiving me into your house."

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CHAPTER III

THE STRAIGHT PATH

"Mr. Clinton has had to go to Bathgate, ma'am. He told me to say he would dine at the club and might be late home. He partic'ly asked that you and Miss Joan—Miss Clinton—shouldn't sit up for him."

The old butler gave his message as if there was more behind it than appeared from his words. Mrs. Clinton, standing in the hall, in her travelling cloak, looked puzzled and a little anxious. It was unlike her husband not to be at home to meet her, especially when she and Joan were returning from so comparatively long a visit—and there was something so very interesting to talk about. And, although he frequently lunched at the County Club in Bathgate, he had not dined there half a dozen times since their marriage.

"Is Mr. Clinton quite well?" she asked, preparing to move away.

"Well, ma'am, I don't think he is quite well. We've all noticed it. Or it seems more as if he was worried about something. But he's not eating well, ma'am, and not sleeping well."

"Poor father!" said Joan, standing by her mother. "We've been too long away from him. We'll cheer him up, and soon put him right, mother."

Mrs. Clinton went to bed at half-past ten, as usual.

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The Squire came home at eleven o'clock. It was the hour when he expected her to have her light out, if he should come up then.

He went straight to her room. It was in darkness. "Well, Nina," he said from the door, "you're back safely. Sorry I had to be out when you arrived. I'll come to you in a few minutes."

He went along to his dressing-room. Just outside it, in the broad carpeted corridor was Joan. She was in a white dressing-gown, her hair in a thick plait down her back. She looked hardly older than the child she had been five years before.

"Father dear!" she said. "How naughty of you to be away when we came home! Have you heard about it?"

Her beautiful eyes, swimming with tender happiness, looked up into his. She had come close for his embrace.

"My dear child!" he said, kissing her. "My little Joan!"

"I thought you'd be glad," she said, nestling to him. "I'm so frightfully happy, father."

"Well, run along to bed now," he said. "We'll talk about it to-morrow. You ought to have been in bed long ago."

"I know. But I had to stop up and tell you. Good-night, father."

He strained her to him. "Good-night, my darling!"

He was not a man of endearments; he had not called her that since she was a tiny child. She flitted along

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the passage, and he went into his room and shut the door.

The old butler came up to put out the lamps in the corridor. He had performed this duty nightly since he had been a very young butler, and had often thought, as he passed the closed doors, of those who were behind them. For many years there had been somebody behind most of the doors, except in the rooms reserved for visitors. Now there were only three left out of all the big family in whose service he had grown old. He had seen all the children, who had crowded the nursery wing, with their nurses and governess, grow up and leave the nest one by one. It had been such a warm, protected nest for them. He had always liked to go up to the floor on which the nurseries were, and think of all the little white-robed sleepers behind those doors as he passed them. They were so safe, tucked up for the night, and so well-off in that great guarded house, where nothing that might affright other less fortunate children could touch them.

The nursery wing was empty now. Joan had come down to another room on the first floor; he only had one broad passage to see to upstairs. And soon she would have flown. He thought of her with the affection of an old servant as he put out the light outside her room. Little Miss Joan! She was in there with her happiness. He smiled as he turned from that door.

Outside his master's dressing-room his face became solicitous. Mr. Clinton was not well—worried-like.

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Well, he was apt to worry over-much about trifles. The old butler knew him by this time. He had seen him weather many storms, and they had never, after all, been more than mere breezes. Whatever was going on behind the door of that room couldn't be very serious. Its occupant was shielded from all real worries, except those he made for himself. He was one of the lucky ones.

Outside the big room of state, in which so many generations of Clintons had been born to the easy lot awaiting them, and so many heads of that fortunate house had died after enjoying their appointed years of honour and invulnerable well-being, his face cleared. Mrs. Clinton had come home; she would put right whatever little thing was wrong. His master couldn't really do without her, though he thought he could. Behind that door she was lying, waiting for him. He put out the lamp.

The house was now dark and silent, though behind two of the three doors there were lights.

The Squire went along the passage in his dressing-gown, carrying his bedroom candlestick. He blew out the light directly he got inside the room.

When he had given his wife greeting, he said, "I'm tired to-night. We must talk over this affair of Joan's to-morrow."

"You are pleased, Edward, are you not?" she asked. "He is such a dear boy; and they are very much in love with one another."

"I must hear all about it to-morrow," he said, com-

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posing himself for sleep. His usual habit was to go to sleep the moment he got into bed; but he was always ready to talk, if there was anything he wanted to talk about. He would freely express irritation if he was upset about anything, and it sometimes seemed as if he were ready to talk all night. But he would suddenly leave off and say, "Well, good night, Nina. God bless you!" and be fast asleep five minutes later. He never omitted this nightly benediction. Until he said "God bless you, Nina," it was permitted to her to speak to him. When he had said it, he was officially asleep, and not to be disturbed.

He did not say it to-night after his postponement of discussion, but his movement showed that "good-night" was considered to have been said. The omission was ominous.

For a very long time there was complete silence. Then the Squire turned in bed, with a sound that might have been a half-stifled groan, but also an involuntary murmur. Again there was a long silence. Mrs. Clinton lay quite still, in the darkness. Then he turned again, gently, so as not to wake her if she were asleep, and moaned.

Her voice, fully awake, broke through the silence, "Edward, you are not asleep. Porter said you were not well."

He made no reply for a moment. Then he turned towards her and said, "Inverell—he is coming to see me here?"

"Yes. He is coming on Friday."

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"You must put him off, Nina. You must put off the whole thing for a time."

He must have expected an expression of surprise, or a question. But none came.

"There are reasons why I can't consider it for the present," he said. "What to say to him I don't quite know. By and by, perhaps. Joan is very young yet. . . . I don't know what to say; we must think it over."

"Edward," she said, after a pause, "if there is trouble hanging over us, let me know of it. Let me be prepared."

This reply, so different from any that he could have expected, kept him silent for a time. Then he took her hand in his and said, "I don't know why you say that; I had meant to keep it to myself till the trouble came; but I suppose you can always see through me. Nina, there is dreadful trouble coming to us. I hardly know how to tell you about it—how to begin. There is such trouble as I sometimes think nobody ever had to bear before. Oh, my God! how shall I break it to you!"

It was a cry of agony, the first cry he had uttered. It rang through the room. Joan caught the echo of it, and lifted her head from the pillow, but dropped it again and closed her eyes on her happy thoughts.

"Oh, Edward!" Mrs. Clinton cried, clinging to him, "I can't bear to see you suffer like this. My dear husband, there is no need to break anything to me. I know."

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"What!" His voice was low and alarmed. "She has already——"

"Poor Susan told me," she said. "She told me on her death-bed."

He sighed momentary relief. "You have known for all these weeks!" he said. "Oh, why didn't you speak?"

"What could I have said? How could I have helped matters? What was there to do?" Her usually calm, slow speech was agitated, and told him more of what she had gone through than words could have done. "I saw you anxious and troubled, and I longed for you to confide in me; but until you did——"

"I couldn't," he said. "I gave Humphrey my promise. He had his reasons, but whether he ought to have——"

"Oh, I am glad you have told me that," she said in a calmer voice. "No, I think he was wrong—to ask that I should be shut out. I can help you—I have helped you—sometimes, Edward."

He pressed her hand, which was lying in his. "My dear," he said, "I want your help now very much."

"We needn't talk more about the past," she said. "It is known now, is it? You have heard something while I have been away."

He told her, up to the point where Mrs. Amberley had left him. His story was often interrupted by exclamations of pain and disgust, as the intolerable things that had been said to him through that long drawn-out hour of his torture were brought to light.

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He went off into by-paths of explanation, of self-justification, of appeal.

She soothed him, helped him to tell his story, was patient and loving with him, while all the time almost insupportably anxious to come to the end of it, and know the best or the worst. But when he came to Mrs. Amberley's plea for help, stumbling through the specious arguments she had used, as if for the thousandth time he were balancing them, defending them, inclining towards them, she kept silence. She trembled, as she followed the workings of his mind, groping towards a decision, with so little light to help him, or rather with lights so crossed that none shone out clearly above the rest. She thought—she hoped—she knew what his decision had been. But he must tell her of it himself. She could not cut him short with a question. The decision was his. Whatever it had been, he had already made it. If it had been right, a question from her must have expressed doubt; if wrong, censure, or at least criticism.

"I think, when she had left me," he said quietly, "I felt no doubt about what I was going to do. Everything she had said seemed to be true. It seems to be true now, when I repeat it. She *had* suffered wrongfully, and would, to the end of her days. If I had let it be kept dark before, and thought myself right, it wouldn't be less right to keep it dark now. I could pay Sedbergh his money, which was the only thing that had worried me badly, after the rest had been done, and not done by me. The disgrace would be sharper still

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if it came out, because it had been hidden before, and certain things might have been misunderstood, or misrepresented. I knew she would do the worst she could, and wouldn't stick at lies. There was this marriage of Joan's to make or mar—— Oh, I don't know; I can't think straight about it even now. I thought it over for two days and nights. I prayed to God about it. Before Him, I don't know whether I've done right or wrong. I'm bringing misery on you, and everybody I love in the world. I'm dragging the name of Clinton, that has stood high for five hundred years, down in the dust. But I couldn't do it, Nina. I couldn't do it."

She threw herself on his breast weeping. He had never known her weep. "Oh, Edward, my dear, dear husband," she cried, "I love you and honour you more than I have ever done. Our feet are on the straight path. God will surely guide them."

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CHAPTER IV

A CONCLAVE

"Good heavens! What on earth can be the meaning of this?"

Dick was standing in his pyjamas at the window of Virginia's bedroom. They were in a country house on the Yorkshire coast, to which they had come for a few days on their way from Scotland. Letters had just been brought up to them with their morning tea.

"What is it, Dick?" said Virginia from the bed. "Give it to me."

He hesitated for a moment, and then crossed the room to give her the letter he had been reading. As he did so he looked through the other envelopes he held in his hand. "Here is one from the Governor," he said, "which may explain it."

The two letters ran as follows:

Dear Captain Clinton,

I suppose your father has told you of the conversation he and I had together a few days ago, and of his refusal to entertain the request I made of him, to which I had understood him to assent. This is just a friendly note of advice to you to help him to see how absurd his refusal is, and what it will entail, not only to him but to you and all your family. I shall not take any steps

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for a day or two, so that you may have time to bring him to reason. But if that cannot be done, I shall take the steps of which I warned him.

Yours sincerely,

RACHEL AMBERLEY.

MY DEAR DICK,

I want you to come home at once. A very serious trouble has arisen with regard to an action of poor Susan's, of which I have known for some time, but which I was unable to talk to you about. I had thought we should hear no more about it, but I am afraid it must now be known. I wish to consult you about any steps that can be taken; but I fear that none can. In any case I want you to hear the whole story. Your mother sends her love, and wants you and Virginia here. She would like me to tell you the story, but I feel I cannot write it. You must wait until I see you.

Love to Virginia.

Your affectionate father,

EDWARD CLINTON.

Dick's face was grave enough when he looked up from this missive, and handed it, without a word, to Virginia.

"Rachel Amberley!" she exclaimed.

"Yes—and Susan," said Dick. "Trouble indeed! Trouble and mystery! I wish the Governor had told me what it is. Just like him to keep us on tenterhooks for hours! We shall have to start early, Virginia."

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Virginia was frightened. "But, Dick dear, what does it mean?" she cried.

He went and stood at the window, looking out over the sea. His face was very grave. "It means," he said slowly, "that Susan was concerned, somehow, in that Amberley business; and she has found it out, and is asking for money to keep it dark."

"But how could she have been concerned in it? Oh, how dreadful, Dick!"

"She was at Brummels at the time." He pieced his thoughts together slowly. "Perhaps she knew, and took money to hold her tongue. She wanted money almost as much as the other woman. She did *something* she ought not to have done; the Governor says so. Something that she could have been punished for, or this Amberley woman wouldn't have any grounds to go on. *She* has been punished, and can't be punished any more—for that. She could for blackmail, though. She says the Governor gave way to her. That would have been extraordinarily foolish. He refused afterwards, though—seems to have told her to go to the devil. I'm glad he did that. Lord, how he must have been rushed! I wish I'd been there to lend him a hand."

"Oh, poor Mr. Clinton! But what can she do, Dick, this woman?"

"If Susan had known——!" He paused. "She can't have been in it. . . ."

"Oh no, Dick!" Virginia said in a frightened whisper.

"No, the Amberley woman would have given her

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away. I don't think she has found out anything. I think she has waited until she was free of everything herself, and now proposes to let out what she knew all the time about Susan, unless she is paid to keep it to herself. That would be it, or something like it. Well, we shan't know, if we cudgel our brains all day. I must go and dress; and you must get up. I'll tell Finch to look up trains. Don't worry about it, Virginia."

They arrived at Kencote in the late afternoon. Joan was on the platform. Her face was troubled. Virginia kissed her warmly. "What is it, darling?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Joan, as they walked out of the station together. "It is something about Ronald. He is not to come here yet. Oh, what can it be?"

"It isn't anything about Ronald," Virginia said. "We know that much. But it is some great trouble, and I suppose your father has asked him not to come for the present."

"Yes," said Joan. "Mother said she would tell me more after they had talked to you and Dick. Father has been indoors all day. I believe he is ill. Oh, Virginia, I am sure something dreadful is going to happen."

They drove straight to the house, and Dick went in at once to his father's room. The Squire was sitting in his chair, doing nothing. He looked aged and grey.

"Well, Dick," he said, looking up, without a smile. "This is a black home-coming. Ask your mother and

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Virginia to come in. Virginia must know. I'll tell you the story at once."

He told his story, without the circumlocutions he had used to Mrs. Clinton. His voice was tired as he told it, and his narrative was almost bald. "There it is," he ended up. "I don't know whether I'm right or not. Your dear mother says I am. I hope I am. It means untold misery and disgrace. But I shan't pay her a penny, directly or indirectly."

Virginia looked anxiously at Dick, who had been sitting with downcast eyes, and now looked up at his father.

"You needn't worry yourself about that, father," he said.

The Squire's face brightened a little.

"You mean that you think I'm right," he said. "I suppose I am. But I can't be certain of it."

"I can," said Dick. "She can disguise it as she likes; but it's blackmail. We don't pay blackmail."

There were visible signs of relief at this uncompromising statement. The Squire began to argue against it, not because he was not glad it had been made, but to justify his doubts.

"I know it's a difficult case," said Dick. "It's a most extraordinarily difficult case. The only way through it is to act on a broad principle, and stick to it through thick and thin. That's what you've done, and I'm very glad of it. You couldn't have done anything else, really, though you may think you could.

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Under no circumstances do we pay money to anybody to keep anything dark."

"Money *was* paid," said the Squire.

"I had no idea whatever," said Virginia, with frightened eyes.

"Oh, of course not," said Dick. "It wasn't your fault."

His face was clouded. "I can't blame Humphrey," the Squire said, with his eyes on him.

Dick made no reply.

"He came on purpose to ask you," said Virginia. "He didn't try to keep it from you."

"He did keep it from me," said Dick. "I ought to have known."

"What should you have done?" asked the Squire.

Dick did not answer. Mrs. Clinton broke in. "Let us leave that alone," she said. "Humphrey had poor Susan to consider. We have no right to blame him for what he did."

"I say nothing about that, for the present," said Dick. "I must think it over. If I had been there he would not have got the money."

"He wouldn't have told you why he wanted it," Virginia said. "I think you would have paid it—to Gotch—as I did."

"You see how difficult it all is, Dick," said Mrs. Clinton. "At every moment there have been difficulties. Do not think harshly of poor Humphrey."

"He is out of it," said Dick, "at the other side of the world. See what comes of his actions. We couldn't

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be touched if it were not for that—in any way that will harm us. Susan is dead. Nobody else had done anything they could have been accused of, or made sorry for, up till that time."

"Susan had," said Mrs. Clinton. "She was alive then; and she was Humphrey's wife. And wouldn't it have been terrible for us then if she had been punished?"

Dick's face was hard.

"Dick, supposing it had been me!" said Virginia.

"Oh, my dear!" he exclaimed impatiently.

"No, but you must think of it in that way. He stood by her. He *couldn't* let that happen to her."

"Well," said Dick unwillingly, "when you've said that at every stage it has been a difficult question, perhaps you have said all that can be said. The trouble is that it is that payment to Gotch that is coming home to us. That's why, even if father had thought it right, otherwise, to pay her this money now, it would have been the most foolish thing he could have done. He would have been endorsing that transaction. As it is, he can say quite truly that he refused to do it, and we, who did do it, had no idea what it was done for."

"Yes, I see that," said the Squire, "and I never thought of it before. The two things would have hung together."

"She would have made further demands," said Dick. "We should have been under her thumb."

"She said she would satisfy me of that," said the Squire.

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"She may have said so. She would have been too clever for you. She would have drawn us in, until we should have had to do something downright dishonourable—that there couldn't have been any doubt about—or defy her and take the consequences, as we've got to do now. We should have been living under the sword, perhaps for years, never knowing when it was going to fall, shelling out money all the time. Oh, it doesn't do to think about! And no better off at the end of it than we are now."

"It's true," said the Squire. "I wish I'd had you to show it all so clearly to me while I was going through that awful time, making up my mind. Oh, Lord!" He wiped his brow, damp with the horror of thinking of it.

"You made up your mind without seeing clearly," said Mrs. Clinton. "You did what was right because it was right."

"And now we've got to take our punishment for it," said the poor Squire, with a wry smile.

"That is what we'd better talk about," said Dick. "The other is all over. We can talk about that later."

"Herbert Birkett is coming down to-morrow," said the Squire. "I wrote and told him he must, and he sent me a wire. He is playing golf at North Berwick. It is her threat of an action for conspiracy that I want to ask him about."

"That's bluff," said Dick. "Who conspired to do what? Humphrey is out of the country. He had better stay there. She can't get at him. Everybody

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else is blameless. You refused, and you were the only one besides him who knew anything about it."

"I can't prove that, and she won't stick at lies."

"That's true enough. But you *can* prove it. She will have to get the Gotches over to prove anything at all, and his evidence will clear you. Besides, you refused her the second time."

"I can't prove *that*. There were only she and I."

"By Jove!" Dick felt in his breast pocket. "She's given herself away there. I've got a letter from her. She says you refused. She isn't as clever as I thought she was."

"It's all bluff," said Dick contemptuously, when the letter had been read. "I don't think she could get the Gotches over, for one thing. And supposing she did succeed in bringing it before a court, you could tell your story in the most public way. Nobody would have a word of blame for you, or for any of us. I'm not certain it wouldn't be the best possible thing that could happen for us."

"I shouldn't like it to come to that," said the Squire.

"Well, I don't think it will. We've got other things to face—perhaps worse things. I shan't answer her letter, though I'll take good care to keep it. When she sees that nothing is coming she'll begin to spread reports. That's when we shall have to be on the look-out."

"We have done nothing wrong," said Mrs. Clinton. "She will only be attacking poor Susan; and anybody

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whose opinion of us we should value will think that a wicked thing to do, now that Susan is dead."

"But ought we not to defend Susan's memory?" Virginia asked.

All three of them were silent. Dick was the first to speak.

"We have to think straight about it," he said. "You can't defend Susan, alive or dead. It was shielding her that has put us in the wrong, where we are in the wrong. All that we can do is not to admit anything, not to deny anything; let people think what they will. Keep quiet. That's a good deal to do, for if we liked to take the offensive we could clear ourselves once and for all."

"How could we do that?"

"Have her up for slander."

"But what she will say about Susan will be true."

"Do you think she will stick to that? No, she will try to blacken us in every way she can. She'll tell lies about us. It's no good saying people won't believe them. They *will* believe them, if we don't defend ourselves. We may have to have her up for slander, after all."

"What can she get out of it all?" asked Virginia in a voice of pain. "It will be horrible. Every right-thinking person must abhor her."

"She will have a right to try and clear herself," said Mrs. Clinton. "It is true that she was accused of doing what Susan really did, and the accusation has never been cleared up."

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"That *is* true," said Dick, "and if she confines herself to truth, we have no right to try and stop her. Under all the circumstances—her trying to get money for her silence, and so on—I don't see that we are under the smallest obligation—of honour or anything else—to help her. If we come out into the open we shan't be able to keep Susan's guilt dark. That's why I think she will drag us into attacking her. We shall see what Herbert Birkett says. All we have to do in the meantime is to live on quietly here as usual, and wait for what comes."

"There are the others to be thought of," said Mrs. Clinton. "Jim and Cicely, Walter and Muriel, Frank, all of them. They must be prepared."

"Yes," said Dick unwillingly. "They are bound to hear of it. We must tell them. Get them down here as soon as possible. I will go over and tell Jim and Cicely to-morrow."

The Squire had been sitting in a blessed state of quiescence. He had done his part. Dick had a clearer head than he. In his bruised state, he was only too ready to let Dick take the lead in whatever had to be done.

"There is my poor little Joan to think of," he said. "Young Inverell—I have put him off. Joan must be told why."

"I will tell her," Mrs. Clinton said. "Poor child, it is hardest for her, just now. But he will not give her up—I am sure of it."

"I don't know," said the Squire. "If the whole

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country is going to ring with our name—— His stands high. But I won't have him here until the worst has happened that can happen; and then only if he comes of his own accord. We stand on what honour is left to us. It won't be much. We've been talking as if we could all clear ourselves at Susan's expense, if everything comes out. We can't. She was one of us, poor girl. We suffer for her sins."

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CHAPTER V

WAITING

Brummels,
Carchester, Sept. 26th, 19—.

My Dear Edward,

I have to thank you for your second letter, and for your cheque for £7,000, which I cannot now refuse, but which, upon my soul, I don't know what to do with. If I buy another necklace with it, I publish to the world—or to such part of it as will see the pearls upon my wife's neck—what I intend to keep even from the partner of my joys and sorrows herself. If only a certain young woman had been able to bring herself to consent to the proposal made to her, the difficulty might have been got over by adding to *her* stock of trinkets. But it is of no use to cry over that, and my little friend Joan will assuredly have considered herself justified in her refusal by the somewhat startling suddenness with which the illustrious Robert consoled himself for her loss. These affairs move too quickly for me in my old age. The young woman whom I now have the honour to call daughter-in-law is all that could be wished from the point of view of health and high spirits, and I have nothing against her. But I do not feel impelled to hang an extra seven thousand pounds' worth of pearls round her neck. If that is a criticism

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on her, so be it. But she is not Joan. She is very far from being Joan.

I have much news for you, my dear Edward, which only my inveterate habit of procrastination has caused to be left till now.

The woman fastened upon Mary at Harrogate. This must have been after she had given up all idea of getting anything out of you. No doubt she followed her to that invigorating resort, and it is unfortunate that my poor wife should not be able to drink her waters of bitterness without being frightened out of her five wits by *that* resurrection. Fortunately I was within hail, and arrived on the scene in time to deal with the situation. I gathered from her account of her interview with you—my poor friend, what you must have gone through!—that you had very loyally exonerated me from all possibility of blame or misunderstanding, and I was pleased to be able in some sort to repay that loyalty. I did not lie, Edward—at least not to her. What fine adjustments of veracity one may have made later, in connubial intimacy, let no man presume to sit in judgment upon. I had received your first letter. I said neither yea nor nay, but rang the changes upon a monotonous charge of her having tried to extort money from you. It was the first line of defence, and I had no other. But she never got behind it. There is a bland but dogged persistency in my nature which ought to have carried me far. It carried me to the point of driving her to uncontrollable rage, which is something of a triumph in itself. To

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Mary I said before her, "This lady may not have stolen your necklace. You have her word for it. I have the word of my friend, Edward Clinton, that she asked him for money to stop her from spreading the report that his daughter-in-law stole it. She is dead and cannot defend herself. Also, Edward Clinton refused to give her any money. These two facts are enough for me. I recognise this lady's existence for the last time. I do not presume to dictate your actions, but if you are wise I think you will do the same."

We got rid of her, and she left Harrogate the next morning. I let her know, by the bye, that you held a letter from her admitting the fact that she had made demands on you and that you had refused them; and you may tell your son that she probably regrets having written that letter as much as any she ever wrote. It is a master weapon.

Well, that is the attitude I shall take up—my wife too, although she will talk a great deal, and be swayed by whatever opinion may be held by whatever person she talks to. There is *bound* to be talk, and a great deal of talk. You cannot help that. But it will die down. Deny nothing, admit nothing, except that you refused to pay her money. That is my advice to you.

They say that Colne is going to marry her. Birds of a feather! He is, at any rate, hot—spirituously so—in his defence of her, and in his offence against you and yours. I met him passing through London; for the sins of my youth I still belong to the Bit and Bridle Club, and I went there for the first time for I should

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think twenty years, and fell upon him imbibing. Rather, he fell upon me, and *I* fell upon my parrot-cry. "If you have any influence over that lady," I said to him, "I should advise you to advise her to keep quiet. She *would* have kept quiet—for money. It is known that she asked for it, and the less it has cause to be stated, the better for what reputation she has."

I left my lord in the maudlin stage, crying out upon the world's iniquity, of which he has considerable first-hand knowledge; but when he comes to what senses he still possesses he will, I hope, remember my advice. Let him marry the lady, by all means. She will have what protection she deserves, and there will be some who will accept her. They will cross neither my path nor yours, for our orbits and those of Colne do not intersect.

Finally, my old friend, set your teeth against what must come, and never lose sight of the fact that it will pass. You have been remarkably tried, and have escaped more pit-falls than could have been expected of any fallible mortal. There are no more in front of you, and all you have to do is to walk straight on with your usual stride.

Ever very sincerely yours,

SEDBERGH.

This letter gave the Squire some comfort. It contained almost the first definite news he had had. He had been living in that uncomfortable state in which the mind is wrought up to meet trouble which is bound

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to come, and the trouble tarries. Every morning he had arisen with the anticipation of the storm breaking; every night he had lain down, having lived through such a day as he might have lived at this season of the year for the last forty years. The storm had not broken yet.

Was it too much to hope that it would, after all, pass over?

He looked up from the letter with that enquiry in his mind. But his face soon clouded again. Though not in the full downpour, he was already caught by it.

Poor little Joan! She knew. She was going about the house, trying hard to be as bright as usual. Sometimes he heard her singing. That was when she passed the door behind which he was sitting. She came in to him much more freely than she had ever done, and sat and talked to him. His daughters had never done that, nor his sons very frequently, with the exception of Dick. It was an empty house now. He and Joan and Mrs. Clinton were a good deal together. Joan had even persuaded him to take her out cubbing. None of the Clinton girls had ever been allowed to ride to hounds; but there were so many horses in the stable, and so few people to ride them now, that he had given way. But he had only been out cubbing twice himself this season. He was getting too old, he said. He had never said that of himself before, about anything, which was why Joan had pressed him to take her. But three times it had happened that she had risen at dawn, and Mrs. Clinton had come in to her and said that

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her father had not slept all night, but was sleeping now, and had better be allowed to sleep on.

Joan had heard nothing from her young lover since the letter had been written asking him to postpone his visit. She said nothing to anybody about him, but went about the house as usual, singing sometimes.

There had been one day amongst the young birds, in which Sir Herbert Birkett, Jim Graham, and Walter only had assisted from outside Kencote. The Squire could not bring himself to ask his neighbours to shoot, nor to shoot with them. The strain was too great. On his tall horse by the covert-side, in those early meets of the hounds, he had always been on the look-out for suspicion and avoidance, and fancied them when they had not been there. But the news might come at any moment, filtering through any one of a score of channels to this retired backwater of meadow and wood and stream, and darkening it, to him whose whole life had been spent in its pleasant ways, with shameful rumour.

It had been settled that life was to go on as usual at Kencote. But he had lost the spring of his courage. Even if no one outside knew of his dishonour, he knew of it himself. When the trouble came he would face it with what courage he could. In the meantime he kept more and more to the house, where he sat in his room, over the fire, reading the papers, or doing nothing.

His half-brother, the Rector, came often to see him. He was some years the younger of the two, but for years had looked the older, until now. The Squire was ageing under his trial. He had lost his confident,

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upright bearing, shambled just a very little when he walked, and carried his head a trifle forward. His face was beginning to lose its healthy ruddiness, and his beard was whiter, or seemed so.

The two men had always been good friends, but were as unlike in character and pursuits as possible. The Rector was gentle and retiring, a little bit of a scholar, a little bit of a naturalist, gardener, musician, artist. He had no sporting tastes, but liked the country and lived all the year round in his comfortable Rectory. He was not a Clinton, but had been so long in their atmosphere that their interests were largely his. He had been one of the first to be told of the catastrophe. He had made no comments on it, but had shown his sympathy by many kind but unobtrusive words and acts.

He came in as the Squire was sitting with Lord Sedbergh's letter in his hand.

"Well, my dear Edward," he said, "it is such a lovely morning that I was tempted out of my study. It is my sermon morning, and I shall have a good one to preach to you on Sunday. I was in the vein. I shall go back to it with renewed interest."

"I've had a letter that may interest you," said the Squire. "In a way it seems to shed a gleam of light. But I don't know. Things are black enough. It's this waiting for the blow to fall that is so wretched. I had rather, almost, that everyone knew."

The Rector read through the letter carefully and handed it back.

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"If nothing but the truth is to be told . . . !" he said.

"You mean that won't be so bad for us. It does look as if there might be a chance of her not telling more than the truth, for her own sake. If she is going to marry that creature! Colne! Bah! What mud we're mixed up with! To think it rests with a man like that to keep her quiet!"

"Is he so bad?" enquired the Rector.

"Bad! The sort of man that makes his order a by-word, for all the world to spit upon. I should think even you must have some knowledge of him. His first wife divorced him; his second died because he ill-treated her."

"Is that known?"

"Yes. In the way these things *are* known."

"He was Hubert Legrange, wasn't he? He was in my tutor's house at Eton—after your time. He wasn't bad then—high-spirited, troublesome, perhaps—that was all. But warm-hearted—merry. I liked him."

"Ah, my dear Tom! That's the sad thing, when you get to our age. To see the men you've known as boys—how some of them turn out! I've sometimes thought lately that I ought to have been more grateful to God Almighty for keeping me free from a good many temptations I might have had. I married young; I settled down here; it was what suited me. But I see now that those tastes were given to me for my good. If it hadn't been for that I might have gone wrong just as well as another. I had money from the moment I

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came of age. I could have done what I liked. Money's a great temptation to a young fellow."

The Rector hardly knew whether to be pleased or sorry at this vein of moralising that had lately come over his brother. It showed his mind working as he might have wished to see it work, towards humility and a more lively faith; but it also showed him deeply affected by the waves that were passing over his head; and the waves were black and heavy.

"What you say is very true," he said. "God keep us all faithful, as He kept you, Edward. You were tempted, and you were upheld. You see that now, I think."

"I thought," said the poor Squire after a pause, "that God was working to avert this disgrace from me. Everything seemed to have been ordered, in a way that was almost miraculous, to that end. It was just when I was shaking off the last uncomfortable thoughts about it, when everything seemed most bright for the future, that the blow fell. Well, I suppose it was to be, and it will come right for us all in the end; though I don't think I shall know a happy moment again as long as I live. I was living in a fool's paradise. I don't quite understand it, Tom."

The Rector thought he did. A fool's paradise is a paradise that the fool makes for himself, and when he is driven out of it blames a higher power. He was not inclined to think his brother the worse off, in all that really mattered, for having been driven out of his paradise. But it was a little difficult to tell him so.

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The necessity was spared him for the moment. Dick came in, and was shown the letter.

"I think that is the way things will work," he said. "She will be repulsed by decent people, and she will come to see that whatever mud she stirs up, more than half of it will stick to her. If she marries Colne—or even if she only clings on to him as her champion—he'll come to see, if he has any sense, that the less she talks the better."

"He would want to see her cleared," said the Rector.

"Yes, and that's our difficulty. Sedbergh is very good; but I don't like it, all the same."

"Don't like what?" asked the Squire.

"I wish to God we could come out into the open." He spoke with strong impatience. "She's in the wrong. Yes. Scandalously in the wrong—a blackmailer, everything you like to say of her. But she's also in the right, and that's just where she can hurt us—where she *is* hurting us."

"Has anything happened?" asked the Squire anxiously.

"Yes. It's reached us at last. It's creeping like a blight all over the country—above ground, underground. It will crop up where you never could have expected. And what satisfactory answer can we give, without telling the truth, and the whole truth?"

"Tell us what has happened," said the Squire.

"I went into Bathgate, to Brooks, the saddler. I always have a talk with the *old* man, if he's in the shop; and he was there alone. He hummed and ha'd a lot,

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and said there was a story going about that he thought I ought to know of. And what do you think the story was? Humphrey stole the necklace and gave it to Mrs. Amberley. Susan found it out and it killed her. You gave Humphrey money on condition he never showed his face in England again. That's the sort of thing we are up against."

The Squire's face was a sight to see. The Rector relieved the tension by laughing, but not very merrily.

"That story won't hurt us," he said.

"That's all very well, Tom," said Dick. "It wouldn't hurt us if there was nothing behind. But what can you say? It's a lie. Yes. And you say so. What do you look like, when you say it? Brooks didn't believe it, of course. But he knew well enough there was *something*, or he wouldn't have told me. How did it come? Who knows? He heard it in the 'George.' They were talking of us. They'll be talking of us all over Bathgate; then all over the country. Trace that story back, and you'll get something nearer the truth. That will spread into another story. There will be many different stories."

"They will contradict one another," said the Rector.

"Yes. And everyone who hears or tells us of them will want to know exactly where the truth lies. It will all go on behind our backs; but every now and then somebody, out of real consideration to us, as I think old Brooks told me, or out of impudent curiosity, will bring it to our notice. Then what are we to say? Oh, why can't we tell the truth?"

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"We can't," said the Squire, rousing himself. "We can only contradict the lies. Well, now it has come, I am ready for it. I'll go to Brooks. I'll talk to him. I'll go and sit on the Bench. I've been sitting here doing nothing—shirking. I'm glad it has come at last."

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CHAPTER VI

THE POWER OF THE STORM

THE rumours grew, and spread everywhere. The story was discussed in all the clubs, in all the drawing-rooms, in every country house. Allusions, carefully calculated to escape the law of libel by the narrowest margin, appeared in many newspapers. All about peaceful Kencote it buzzed hotly, assuming many shapes, showing itself in awkward withholding of eyes, that bore the look of the cut direct, or in still more awkward geniality. It peered out at the Squire wherever he went, and he now went everywhere within the orbit in which he had moved, a respected, honoured figure, all the days of his life.

He fought gamely; his head was once more erect, his step firm. But he fought a losing battle. Dick, with his clear sight, had seen the weak spot from the first. There was no answer to make.

There was, indeed, nothing to answer. In the first flush of his determination to take the field, he had been for going straight to old Brooks the saddler, with whom he had had friendly dealings ever since his schooldays, and asking him, in effect, what he meant by it. But cool-headed Dick had restrained him.

"What can you do more than I did? I laughed, and said, 'That's a pretty story to have told about you';

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and he said, 'Yes, Captain, you ought to stop it. I'll tell everybody exactly what you tell me to tell them,' and waited with his head on one side for *my* version. What's your version going to be when you've told him the story he heard is a lie, which he knows well enough already?"

So the Squire went to Brooks, the saddler, because he always did go in to have a chat with him at the commencement of the hunting season, but said nothing to him at all of what they were both thinking about. The chat was lively on both sides, but when he went out of the shop he knew that Brooks knew why he had come. To brazen it out.

No need to go through the places he went to, and the people he talked to. He went everywhere he had been accustomed to go, and he talked to everybody he had been accustomed to talk to. And because he was unused to playing a part, he overdid this one. He had been a hearty man with his equals. Now he was almost noisy. He had been a cordially condescending man with his inferiors. Now he was effusively patronising. He would have done better to sulk in his tent until the storm of rumour had died down. And he felt every curious look, every unasked question.

It was ominous that none of his friends—for he had many lifelong friends amongst his country neighbours, though no very intimate ones—said to him that ugly rumours were going about, and that they thought he ought to know of them so that he could contradict them. It was obvious that he knew of them, and that

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they thought he could not contradict them, or they would have spoken. Nobody could tell anybody else that he had heard the truth of these absurd stories from Clinton himself, and it was so and so. Nobody cut him, nobody even avoided him; it was, indeed, difficult to do so, he was so ubiquitous; but the unasked, unanswered questions behind all the surface sociality poisoned the air. The Squire was in torment in all his comings and goings.

Dick fared better, because he took things more naturally. But nobody asked him questions either. He was not an easy man to ask questions of. If they had done so, he would have been ready with his answer: "I can't tell you the truth of the story, because it's a family matter. But I'll tell you this much: Mrs. Amberley tried to blackmail my father, and he told her to go to the devil." It would not have answered much, but it would have made some impression.

But the trouble was, and Dick felt it deeply, that he could take no steps of his own. He could go to nobody and say, "I know there are ugly rumours going about against us. Tell me, as a friend, what they are, and I'll answer them." The answer, in that case, would have had to be different, and must have contained the truth of the story, if it were to be satisfying.

The Squire grew thinner and older, almost noticeably so, every day. Mrs. Clinton was in the deepest distress about him, but could do nothing. He would come home, from hunting, or from Petty Sessions, which he now attended regularly, and keep miserable silence, all

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his spirit gone. She and Joan were companionable with him, as far as he would let them be, and he liked to have them with him; but he would not talk, or if he roused himself to do so, it was with such painful effort that it was plain that it was only to please them, and brought no relief to himself. He would have no one asked to the house. He was afraid of refusals.

One morning a letter came to him with the stamp of a Government office, franked by the Minister at the head of that office. He opened it in surprise. It ran as follows:

DEAR MR. CLINTON,

My nephew, Inverell, has made a communication to me concerning which I should like to have a conversation with you. If you will do me the honour of calling on me when you are next in London I will do my best to meet you at any hour you may arrange for. But as my time is apt to be occupied a good deal ahead, if you can make it convenient to see me here at 12 o'clock next Tuesday morning, I shall run no risk of disappointment.

Yours very truly,

CHEVIOT.

"Now I shall have something to take hold of," said the Squire, brightening.

He dressed that morning in better spirits than he had shown for some time. Poor little Joan! It had hurt him terribly that her happy love story had been

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cut off short, snuffed out altogether, as it had seemed, by the postponement of her young lover's visit. He had made no sign, and it was now a month ago and more since the letter had been written to him. Joan must have given up hope by this time. She must be sick at heart, poor child! Yet she never showed it. She was tender of *his* wounds, anxious to brighten *his* life. But what did his life, now almost within sight of its end—broken, dishonoured—matter beside her young life, just opening into full flower, only to be stricken by the same blight of dishonour? He would have given anything—life itself—to lift the weight off her, so tender had his conscience become under the pummelling of fate, so big his heart for those to whom he owed love and shelter. As bitter as death itself it was to feel that he who had surrounded his dear ones—dear all through, though subjugated to his whims and prejudices—with everything that wealth and ease could provide for refuge, should see them stripped of his succour, and himself powerless to protect them.

He shaved himself by the window looking out on to his broad, well-treed park, where his horses were being exercised. He looked at them with some stirring of interest. Somehow, he had not cared to look at them of late, whether it was that the mirth of the stable-lads, subdued by reason of their being in sight of the windows of the house, but none the less patent in its youthful irresponsibility, jarred on his sombre mood; or that such signs of his own wealth as a string of little-used hunters, kept on because he had always kept them, hurt

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him because of the futility of his wealth to help in the present distress.

What, after all, could young Inverell have done? Mrs. Clinton's letter had, on instructions, been entirely non-committal. He had been asked to postpone his visit. No reason had been given; no future time suggested. He could only have waited—in surprise and dismay—for a renewal of the invitation. He could not, after that letter, have written to Joan. Perhaps he might, after a week or two had elapsed, have written to the Squire himself. But by that time the blight had begun to spread. It must have reached his ears pretty quickly. The higher the rank the fresher the gossip; and the name of Clinton would not have passed him by, if it had been whispered ever so lightly.

Well, what then? The Squire, sensitive now to the very marrow, drooped again. He had held aloof. There was no gainsaying that. Five weeks had passed, and Joan had been left unhappy, to lose some little shred of hope every day. It was natural perhaps. He was almost a young prince—not one of those of his rank who marry lightly to please their fancy of the moment. He would be right to wait for a time if the house from which he had chosen his bride was under a cloud, to see what that cloud was and whether it would pass. If it continued to hang black and threatening over those who made no effort to lift it, he might come to ask himself in time whether he could not snatch his lady from under its dark canopy; but he would not ask it until time had been given for its removal. Oh,

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the bitterness of the thought that it was Kencote, of all houses, over which the cloud lay thick and heavy—Kencote, which had basked in the mild sunshine of honour and dignity for as long as, or longer than his own house had attracted its more radiant beams!

But now he had moved. This letter must mean that a chance was to be given for the head of the house to clear himself. Whatever came of it, it was the first chance that the Squire had had, and he was eager to take it.

He regarded the letter from all points of view, and was inclined to think favourably of it. It bore a great name—that of a man of the highest honour in the counsels of the nation, known to everyone. It was courteously written. "Dear Mr. Clinton." The Squire could not remember ever having met him. He was of a younger generation than the great men he had foregathered with in his youth and theirs. Dick would probably have some slight acquaintance with him, but even Dick, who had been so much in the swim, had not habitually consorted with Cabinet Ministers of the first rank. The Squire would know many of his friends and relations, of course. His own name would be known to the great man—Clinton of Kencote—there was still virtue in it. It was not as if the young man had gone to his guardian and told him that he wanted to marry the daughter of this or that country gentleman whose status would have to be explained and examined. This was a letter to an equal. It was nothing that he was asked

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to go up and present himself before the writer. The Squire was quite ready to pay due deference to a man whose claim to deference was founded on distinction of a sort that he did not claim himself. It was hardly to be expected that a Secretary of State in the middle of an Autumn Session should wait upon him. Nothing more could have been desired than that he should put his request with courtesy, which he had done.

Dick, when he showed him the letter, was not so sure. "Of course you would have to go to London to meet him," he said. "But it's really no less than a summons, for a time and place that he doesn't consult you about. However, we won't worry ourselves about that. What are you going to say to him?"

The Squire hadn't thought that out yet. He should know when he got there, and heard what Lord Cheviot wanted of him.

"I think it's pretty plain what he wants," said Dick. "You've got to show my lord that you're a fit and proper person to form an alliance with. That's what we're brought to. It's the most humiliating thing that has happened yet. If it weren't for poor little Joan I should say chuck his letter into the fire, and don't answer it, and don't go."

It was significant of the change that had been wrought in the Squire that it was Dick who should be expressing angry resentment at the hint of a slight to the Kencote dignity, and he who should say, "I don't take it in that way. And in any case I would sink my own feelings for the sake of Joan."

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"You'll have to be careful," said Dick. "He will want to overawe you with his position. That's why you are to go and see him at his office. Why couldn't he have asked you to his house or his club, or called on you at yours? This is a private matter, and privately we're as good as he is; or, at any rate, we want nothing from him."

"But we do," said the Squire. "We want Joan's happiness."

"If Inverell wants Joan, he will take her. She's good enough for him, or anybody, not only in herself but in her family."

"She would be if we were not under this cloud."

"She is in any case. Don't lose sight of that when you are talking to him. He has a sort of cold air of immense dignity about him; he is polite and superior at the same time."

"Do you know him?"

"No. At least I've been to his house. We nod in the street. He knows who I am. He came down to Kemsale some years ago. He was a friend of old Cousin Humphrey's. Didn't you meet him then?"

"Perhaps I did," said the Squire. "I don't remember. Ah, if poor old Humphrey Meadshire had been alive, a lot of this wouldn't be happening."

Lord Meadshire, a kinsman of the Squire's, had been Lord Lieutenant of the county, and the leading light in it, for very many years. But he had died, a very old man, two years before, and the grandson who had succeeded him was "no good to anybody."

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"Don't let him overawe you," was Dick's final advice, significant enough, as addressed to the Squire, of what had been wrought in him.

There was no attempt made to overawe him, unless by the ceremony that hedges round a great Secretary of State in his inner sanctuary, when the Squire presented himself at the time appointed.

Lord Cheviot rose from his seat and came forward to meet him. "It is good of you, Mr. Clinton," he said, shaking hands, "to come to me here. If you had been in London I should have called on you."

He was a tall, severe-looking man who seldom smiled, and did not smile now. He was so much in the public eye, and had for years played a part of such dignity, that it was impossible for the Squire, bucolic as he was, not to be somewhat impressed, now that he was in his presence.

But his greeting had removed any feeling that had been aroused by Dick's criticism of his letter, and he put the Squire still more at his ease by saying as he took his seat again, "I had the pleasure of meeting you some years ago at Lord Meadshire's. I think he was a relation of yours."

"Yes," said the Squire. "Poor old man, we miss him a great deal in my part of the world."

Lord Cheviot bowed his head. He had finished with the subject of Lord Meadshire.

"As you know, Mr. Clinton," he said, "I was guardian to my nephew during his minority. He was brought up as a member of my own family; I stand

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as a father to him, more than is the case with most guardians. That will excuse me to you, I hope, for interfering in a matter with which, otherwise, I should have had no concern."

The Squire did not quite like the word "interfering," and made no reply.

"He has told me that he wishes to marry your daughter, that she is everything, in herself, that could be desired as a wife for him, which I have no sort of hesitation in accepting—in believing."

"In herself!" Again the Squire kept silence, though invited by a slight pause to speak.

"He tells me that it was understood that he should go to you immediately after he and this very charming young lady had parted in Scotland, that he had Mrs. Clinton's invitation, and that it was withdrawn, and has not since been renewed."

The Squire had to speak now. He made a gulp at it. "There were reasons," he said, "why I wished the proposal deferred for a time. I needn't say," he added hurriedly, "that they had nothing to do with—with your nephew himself."

"You mean that you would not object to a marriage between him and your daughter?"

Was there a trace of satire in this speech? None was apparent in the tone in which it was uttered, or in Lord Cheviot's face as he uttered it, sitting with his finger tips together, looking straight at his visitor.

If there was satire its sting was removed by the Squire answering simply: "Such a marriage could only

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have been gratifying to me"; and perhaps it was rebuked by his adding, "I have never met your nephew, but he bears such a character that any father must have been gratified for his daughter's sake."

This gave the word to Lord Cheviot, whose attitude had been that of one waiting for an explanation.

He changed his position, and bent forward. "I think, under the circumstances, Mr. Clinton, we are entitled to ask why you wished the proposal—otherwise gratifying—to be deferred."

There was a tiny prick in each of his speeches. The Squire was made more uncomfortable by them than was due even from the general discomfort of the situation.

He raised troubled eyes to those of his questioner. "I suppose you are not ignorant," he said, "of what is being said of us?"

"Of 'us'?" queried Lord Cheviot.

"Of me and my family. All the world seems to be talking of us."

Lord Cheviot dropped his eyes. He may not have liked to be put into the position of questioned, instead of questioner.

"I am not ignorant of it," he said.

"It was for him," said the Squire, "to come or to keep away. As long as my name was being bandied about in the wicked way it has been, I would not ask him to my house. I have my pride, Lord Cheviot. If your nephew marries my daughter, he marries her as an equal. My family has been before the world as long as his, or your lordship's. It has not reached the

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distinction, of late, of either; but that is a personal matter. If Lord Inverell takes a bride from Kencote he takes her from a house where men as high in the world as he have taken brides for many generations past."

Dick, if he had heard this speech, might have been relieved of his fear that the Squire would be overawed by the Cabinet Minister. He might also have felt that as an assertion of dignity it would have been more effective if postponed to a point in the conversation when that dignity should have been affronted.

"If that were not so, Mr. Clinton," said Lord Cheviot, "I should not have done myself the honour of seeking an interview with you. Let us come to the point—as equals—and as men of honour. You have said that your name is being bandied about in a wicked way. I take that to mean that accusations are being made which have no truth in them."

"Many accusations are being made," said the Squire, "which have no word of truth in them. They will not be believed by anybody who knows me—who knows where I stand. But mud sticks. Many people do not know me—most people, I may say, who have heard these stories; for they have spread everywhere. I stand as a mark. I shelter myself behind nobody; I draw in nobody, if I can help it. That is why I asked your nephew to put off his visit to my house, and why I have not renewed it since."

"It was the right way to act," said Lord Cheviot, "and I thank you for acting so. But, for my nephew,

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it does not settle the question; it only postpones it. He loves your daughter, and she, I am assured, loves him. I will not disguise anything from you, Mr. Clinton. Personally, I should prefer that this marriage should not take place. But I cannot dictate, I can only advise. I advised my nephew to wait awhile. He did so. And he is willing to wait no longer. Mr. Clinton, when slanders are circulated, there are ways of stopping them."

"What are they?" cried the Squire. "The slander takes many forms. None of them are brought before me. I know they are being circulated; that is all. I know where they spring from, but I can't trace them back. There is cunning at work, Lord Cheviot, as well as wickedness. There is nothing to take hold of."

"If you had something definite to take hold of, you could meet it; you could disperse these slanders?"

"Yes," said the Squire boldly.

"Then I can be of service to you. I have a letter from Lord Colne, in which he makes certain accusations. It was written in answer to one from me. I had heard that he had been making free with my nephew's name in connection with yours, and I wrote on his behalf for definite statements, which could be acted on. Here is his letter."

The Squire took, and read it.

My Lord,

In answer to your letter, my accusation against Mr. Clinton is that the theft of a pearl necklace of

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which Mrs. Amberley was accused last year was committed by a member of his family, that he knew of this, and allowed money to be paid to keep the secret; also that he offered Lord Sedbergh the price of the pearls, which offer was refused.

I am,

Your Lordship's Obedient Servant,

COLNE.

It was overwhelming. Here was the truth, and nothing but the truth. That it was not the whole truth helped the Squire not at all.

"That letter," said Lord Cheviot, when he had given him time to read it, and his eyes were still bent on the page, "is the strongest possible ground for an action for libel. It is evidently meant to be taken so. Lord Colne has constituted himself Mrs. Amberley's champion. It is to him—or to her through him—that the slanders to which you have referred can be traced back."

"May I take this letter?" asked the Squire. "It is what I have wanted—something tangible to go upon."

"Certainly, Mr. Clinton. I am glad to have done you the service—incidentally."

Again the little prick. It was not on the Squire's behalf that the fire had been drawn.

The prick was left to work in. Lord Cheviot sat and waited.

"This is a most infamous woman," the Squire broke out. "She came herself and tried to trap me. I refused to give her money. This is her revenge."

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Still Lord Cheviot waited.

The Squire began to feel that if he had escaped one trap, he was even now in the teeth of another. He wanted time to think it over; he wanted Dick to advise him. But he had no time, and he was alone under the gaze of the cold eyes of the man who was waiting for him to speak.

"I can't decide now exactly what steps I can take about this," he said, speaking hurriedly. "But I suppose you won't be satisfied to wait until I do take steps."

"I shall be quite satisfied, Mr. Clinton," said the chilly voice, "if you tell me that there is no truth in that letter."

Now he was caught in the teeth. He could not think clearly; he had not time to think at all. He could only cling to one determination, that he had not known until now was in his mind. With Humphrey on the other side of the world, and Susan in her grave, he would not exonerate himself by inculpating them.

He rose unsteadily from his chair. "I can only tell you this, my lord," he said. "I have been tried very terribly, and in whatever I have done or left undone, I have followed the path of honour. I can say no more than that now, and I can see that that is not enough. So I will wish you good-morning."

He did not raise his head, or he might have seen the cold, watchful look in Lord Cheviot's eyes after a little fade into a look that was not unsympathetic.

But there was little softening in the voice in which he said, "I must tell my nephew that I have given

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you the opportunity of denying, not a rumour that cannot be pinned down, but a categorical charge, and that you have not denied it."

The Squire made no reply. Lord Cheviot came forward, as if he would have accompanied him to the door; but he went out without a word, and shut it behind him.

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CHAPTER VII

THINKING IT OUT

THE Squire went home in the afternoon. When he reached the junction at Ganton, where trains were changed for Kencote, he walked across the platform to send a telegram. The station-master, with whom he always exchanged a hearty word, touched his hat to him, and looked after him with concern on his face. He had taken no notice of the salutation, although he had seen it. He walked like an old and broken man.

Mrs. Clinton met him at Kencote with a brougham. He had wired for her to do so. For the first time in all the over forty years of their marriage he was not driving himself from the station. He stepped into the carriage, without so much as a glance at his horses, and took her hand. He had come home to *her;* not to his little kingdom.

He went straight up to bed. He had no spirit even for the unexacting routine of his own home. He kissed Joan, who met him in the hall, but without a word, and she went away, after a glance at his face. He would not see Dick when he came.

He slept through the evening, awoke to take some food and drink, but took very little, and slept again. If ever a man was ill, with whom no doctor could have found anything the matter, he was ill.

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Mrs. Clinton hoped that he would sleep through the night, but soon after she laid herself down beside him, in the silence of the night, he awoke. The heavy sleep that had drugged him into insensibility for a time had also refreshed and strengthened him, and for succeeding hours he cried aloud his despair.

"What have I done?" That was the burden of his cry. "Where have I been wrong? Why am I so beaten down by punishment?"

But by and by, spent with beating against the bars, he began to speak calmly and reasonably, as if he were discussing the case of someone else, searching for the truth of things, impartially.

"When Humphrey came and asked me to do what I might very well have done for Gotch on my own account, I refused. I was right there. When he told me that Virginia had given him the money, what was I to do? It was too late to get it back. I had no right to. I might have told Virginia, perhaps, why the money had been wanted. No, I couldn't do that. I had promised Humphrey. I do think he ought not to have asked me for that promise. But it was given. What *could* I have done, Nina, at that stage? I knew about it, that devilish letter says. I allowed money to be paid to keep it secret. Was I to publish it abroad, directly Humphrey told me? Is there a man living who would have done that under the circumstances? Would Cheviot have done it himself? It might just as well have happened to him as to me. Nina, was I bound, by any law of God or man, to do that?"

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"Edward dear, you have done no wrong——"

"No, but answer my question. If it had been you instead of me—that might *very* well have happened. Would *you* have said—after you had been told under a promise of secrecy, mind—Susan must be shown up? Even that wouldn't have been enough; Humphrey wouldn't have shown her up. You would have had to do it yourself. And how could you have done it? Can you really seriously say it was my duty, when Humphrey told me that story, to go and give information to the police?"

"Oh no, no, Edward."

"But what's the alternative? Upon my soul, Nina, I can't see any half-way house between that and what I did. I kept silence, they say. That was Cheviot's charge, and because I couldn't deny it, I stood condemned before him. I wish I could have put the question to *him*, as to what he would have expected of me. Confound him, and his supercilious way! Nina, you haven't answered me. What would *you* have done?"

"Exactly what you did, Edward dear. I am not sure that I should even have had the strength to refuse Humphrey's plea, as you so honourably did, without counting the cost in any way. You were ready to take any consequences, to yourself. Oh, you could not have done more."

"But then, why am I put in the wrong? Those are the charges against me. Those, and that I offered Sedbergh the price of the necklace—which he refused. Yes, he did refuse it, and made me feel, too, that I ought

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not to have asked him to accept it. Why did I feel that? It isn't that he was wrong. He was right, and I should have acted as he did if I had been in his place. But why did I feel ashamed of having offered it to him? What was the alternative? To say nothing about it to him, when Susan had spent thousands of pounds belonging to him, and I knew of it? Can anyone seriously say that that was a more honourable course to take than the one I did take? Nina, help me. Tell me where I was wrong. I *must* have been wrong there, because I felt ashamed."

"It is easy enough now to mark down little errors. In the main, Edward dear, you were right all through—nobly right."

"Little errors! What error was there there? I either offered him the money, or kept from him the fact that a member of my family had spent it. There was no alternative. *Was* there? Do tell me, Nina, if you can see anything that I can't see."

"I think the better way would have been to tell Lord Sedbergh of what had been done, and leave it to him to take steps if he wished to. He would have taken none. You would have been justified. You could not justify yourself any more by paying him back what had been stolen."

"Yes, that is what he said. He would not bear my burden. Why should he have? Yes. I see that, Nina. I was wrong there. I think I was very wrong there."

Oh, how it rent her heart to hear him, who had been

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so ready with his dictatorial censure of all dependent on him, so impervious to every shaft of censure that might have been attracted to himself, thus baring his breast to blame, accepting it, welcoming it, if it would only help to clear away his bewilderment.

"It came to the same thing, dear, in the end," she reminded him. "You had told Lord Sedbergh."

"Ah, but it wasn't quite the same. I can see that now. If I had gone to him as you said, I could have denied the statement that I kept silence. I should have told the one man that perhaps it was right that I should have told. I am beginning to see a little light, Nina. Nothing more could have been expected of me than that. I should have had a complete answer. Oh, why did I make that mistake? It looked to me, afterwards, such a small one. Sedbergh set me right over it—snubbed me really, though in the kindest possible way—and I deserved it. But that didn't end it. That mistake put everything else wrong. I am beginning to see it. But, oh, how difficult it all is!"

"Edward, you *had* told Lord Sedbergh. You told him before you made any suggestion as to payment. He had thought the matter was ended when he had said you were right to tell him, and there was nothing more to be done. You have told me that whenever you have gone over the conversation you had with him."

He thought over this. His slow-moving mind was made preternaturally acute by long dwelling on the one interminable subject. "Should I have told him anything?" he asked, "if I hadn't wanted to get the

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debt off my shoulders? No, I think not. Humphrey would not have consented for one thing, and I had given him my word. I suppose I was wrong there too. I ought never to have given him my word. Yet he would not have told me if I had not."

"That is Humphrey's blame. He asked you to keep dishonourable silence. You trusted him there. You would not have promised that."

"Then my silence was dishonourable?"

"You told Lord Sedbergh. I think you would have told him in any case. I think that you would have seen that you must. You would have insisted with Humphrey; and you must have had your way. You have acted so honourably where you did see clearly, that I have no doubt you would have seen clearly here. You had no time to think. You were under the influence of the sudden shock. You went up to London to see Lord Sedbergh the very next morning."

"It was pride," he said slowly. "The wrong pride. I have been very blind to my faults, Nina. Pride of place, pride of wealth, pride of birth! What are they in a crisis like this? I was humiliated to the dust before that man this morning. Oh, I have seen myself in a wrong light all my life. God has sent me this trial to show me how little worth I was in His sight. My pride led me wrong. Why was I thinking then about the money at all? Sedbergh was right. That woman was right, there. It was a base thought, and I have been very heavily punished for it."

She lay by his side, comforting him. She thought

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that he would now cease his self-examination, since it had led him to a conclusion damaging to himself, but healing too, if he saw a fault and repented of it. But presently he returned to it again.

"Why did I feel beaten and ashamed before Cheviot? Why has he the right to say those damning words to his nephew, 'I shall tell him that I brought you a definite charge made against your honour, and you did not deny it'?"

"Edward dear, you might have denied it, but for one thing. The charge against you was not true."

"But it was true. I knew of Susan's guilt, and money was paid to keep it secret—money that I knew had been paid."

"That you allowed to be paid," she corrected him. "You did not allow it. It was not paid to keep the secret. Virginia paid it, on behalf of Dick, and paid it with quite a different intention."

"Isn't that a mere quibble?"

"No, it is not. A quibble is a half-truth that obscures a whole one. This is not like that. It is because the whole truth is so difficult to disengage here that it looked like the half-truth. I say nothing of Humphrey; but as regards you it is the whole truth. It is not true—it is a lie—to say that you allowed money to be paid to conceal what you knew. You refused to pay money yourself, because you knew it would have the indirect effect of concealing the truth. It was not in your power to stop the money being paid with an innocent object. And when it is said that you

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knew of Susan's guilt, if that is in itself a charge of keeping silence, the answer is that you did not keep silence. You told Lord Sedbergh. That you offered him the money afterwards is nothing—would, I mean, be considered nothing against you, as coming afterwards. As it is put in that letter it is as untrue as the rest; for it is intended there to look as if you had offered that money too in order to buy silence."

"My dear," he said, "you have a very clever head. I wonder if you are right. That would exonerate me of everything."

"You *are* to be exonerated of everything," she said quietly, "except the mistake of thinking it more important that Lord Sedbergh should be told because of the debt that lay heavy on you than because it was right that he should be told in any case. You did tell him, which is all that anyone inclined to criticise you is concerned with, and *I* know well enough that you would have told him if there were no question of payment. My dear husband, you have been so cast down by the blows you have received that you are inclined to blame yourself, knowing everything, as others are inclined to blame you, knowing nothing."

This was sweet balm to him, and he lay comforting himself with it for some time. But his doubts came back to him.

"Then why did I feel so ashamed before Cheviot?"

She was ready with her answer at once. "For a reason that does you more honour than anything else. You took the sins of others upon you. You took

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shame before him, not for your own faults, but for theirs. If you could have told him everything, he would have seen what even you couldn't see at the time—that the apparent truth in that letter was not the truth. The only true thing in it was that Susan was guilty."

"And that I knew it."

"There was no shame in that, to you, unless you kept silence, which you did not do."

"I can't see that quite straight yet, Nina, though I should like to. Why are you so sure that I should have told Sedbergh in any case, or insisted upon Humphrey telling him?"

"Because I see so plainly how your mind has worked all along. It never did work on that point, because you took the right course at once—we will say, if you like, for not quite the right reason—and it was never a matter to be fought out with yourself. It had been done."

"You are very comforting to me, my dearest. I do believe you are right. I say it in all humility; I think I should not have been allowed to go wrong there."

"I am sure you would not; quite sure. Even with your pride to guide you, as you say it did, you could not have consented long to hold back the truth from Lord Sedbergh. Him, at least, you must have told—as you did."

"Well, I give in, Nina. You give me great comfort."

"And I give you great honour too, Edward. You

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have taken the burden and the shame on yourself when a word would have removed it."

"Not only on myself, Nina. You share it. We all share it; our poor little Joan more heavily than any of us."

"I cannot but think that Joan will win her happiness in time. He would not be what he is if he allowed this to keep him from her. The talk will die down. No one will blame her—can blame her—even now, when it is at its loudest. We must wait in patience for what will come. Dear Joan will be all the happier when her trial is over, and the stronger. She is bearing it bravely. I am proud of my girl."

The Squire lay for a long time silent. Then he said, "Well, we have thought it out together, my dear. I can face what must come now. We face it together. We live on quietly here, as we have always lived. I ask no one, from now, to stand and deliver. I do my duty amongst my neighbours, and those dependent on me, and they think of me what they please. You who know me, love and trust me, and that shall be enough. We have our quiet home, and our children, and their children, and the friends who have stood by us. And we have our religion—our God, Who has helped us, and will help us. We have our burden too, but He will make it light for us. I feel at peace about it now, Nina—almost happy. I think I shall sleep to-night. Good night, Nina. God bless you. May God bless you, my dear wife!"

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CHAPTER VIII

SKIES CLEARING

THE Squire had slept late. Mrs. Clinton had stood by his bed when the breakfast gong had sounded, and looked down upon his face, older without a doubt than it had been a month before, more lined and furrowed, less firm of flesh, less ruddy of skin, but peaceful now, in its deep slumber. She had touched with her hand, lightly and tenderly, his grey head, and then gone downstairs to take the place which he had so seldom missed taking during all the years of their married life.

He got up at once when he awoke, shocked at finding himself so late. The horses had gone back to the stables when he went into his dressing-room, but he stood for a moment or two looking out over the park, and then opened the window. Unconsciously he was taking stock of his surroundings once more, breathing in with the mild autumn air that sense both of space and retirement which was the note of his much-loved home. It was his once more, to enjoy and to take pride in. Lately it had seemed not to be his at all.

Mrs. Clinton sat with him over his late breakfast. He had hardly begun it when Dick came in.

"Well, my boy," said the Squire cheerfully. "Sorry I couldn't see you last night. I was done up. I'm all

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right now, ready for anything. Your dear mother and I have talked it all over. There's nothing to be done but bide our time. It will pass over."

There was a distinct change in his attitude towards his eldest son. He was accustomed to greet his other sons with that fatherly, "Well, my boy!" but not Dick. Dick had the master-head. He never presumed on it to set up authority where it would be hurtful to his father's self-complacency, but he was accustomed to rule, none the less, and the Squire to rely on him to decide in every difficulty. But now he had decided for himself. Dick was his much-admired and trusted son, but not, in this matter, his director, nor even his adviser.

"He got the better of you, I suppose," said Dick, seating himself at the table.

"I suppose he did. I don't know. Is that how you would put it, Nina?"

"Your father saw," said Mrs. Clinton, "when it came to the point, that it meant, if he was to clear himself, he must heap all the blame upon Susan, and in a lesser degree on Humphrey. If he had done that he must have satisfied Lord Cheviot. But he would not do it."

"Rather rough on Joan," said Dick with a slight frown.

"I have told Joan everything," said Mrs. Clinton, "and she sees it as we do. She is content to wait."

"Read that," said the Squire, taking the fateful letter from his pocket. "That is what we have to face.

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I didn't see my way to deny it, so I left his Lordship to attend to the affairs of the nation."

"But it isn't true!" said Dick, when he had read it. "It looks like the truth, but it isn't. You could have denied every word of it, except the first statement—about Susan."

The Squire looked at his wife with a smile. "Dick sees it at once," he said. "It took you and me half the night to get at it, Nina; and I should never have got at it by myself. Well, it isn't true, Dick, as far as it puts blame on me which I don't deserve. But it's true about Susan. I couldn't tell him the story; so I came away."

"And he will tell Inverell that he showed you this letter and you could make no reply to it."

"Yes, I suppose so."

Dick looked deeply disturbed. "I wish I had been there," he said.

"If you had been there, Dick," said Mrs. Clinton, "I think you would have done just the same as your father did. Have you ever faced the necessity of bringing the charge against Susan with your own lips? I don't think you could do it, if it came to the point."

Dick rose and went to the window. "We could not deny it if they brought us to the point," he said.

"No; but that is different."

He thought for a moment, swinging the tassel of the blind. "It seems to me," he said, "to have come to the point where Humphrey ought to speak—ought to be sent for. *We* can't do it. No; perhaps you are

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right; until we are pushed to a point where we shall *have* to do it. But he could; and it ought to be done. Why should father be made to suffer these indignities? Why should poor little Joan lose her happiness in this way? I'm not sure that it isn't our duty to speak out, even now, however much we should dislike having to."

"I can't see it in that way, Dick," said the Squire. "As I said to you once before, Susan was one of us. We should have had to share her disgrace, as a family, if she had been alive; and a very terrible disgrace it would have been, though we might have been shown to be free of blame ourselves. We can't cut ourselves off from her now she is dead. To put it on the lowest ground, it wouldn't do us any good. Nobody would respect us more for it. They would say that we could keep silence about it to save our own skins, but put it all on to her directly it became known. I wouldn't mind what they said, if I didn't feel the same myself. I am not going to mind for the future what anybody says. Let them say what they like. We know that we have done nothing wrong—or very little—and that must be enough for us."

Dick returned to the letter in his hand. "They want us to go for them," he said. "Cheviot must have seen that."

"He did," said the Squire. "I told him I should consider what was to be done."

"Have you considered it?" Dick looked at him as if ready to hear a decision, not to advise on one.

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"Your mother and I think we had better take no steps, for the reason I have already given."

"It's plain enough what it means," said Dick. "They want the story out. They think they will gain, even though it also comes out that she asked you for money. We put too much faith in that weapon. She would give the same reasons that she gave to you. They would sound plausible enough. They have chosen their ground well. I thought they would have spread lies, which we couldn't have proved to be lies, without taking action. I've no doubt that Colne thinks this *is* the truth, and finds it serves their purpose best. It has certainly served it here."

"For the time," said Mrs. Clinton.

"Well, say you take no notice of this. Are they going to stop at this? On these lines they can force us to take action, sooner or later, if that is what they want. We ought to be prepared for it."

"We must take each occasion as it comes," said the Squire.

"I think that Humphrey ought to be written to. I don't think it will be possible to avoid taking action, if they press us. We can stand this. We don't know that we shall be able to stand the next move, or the one after. It is he who has got us into this—he, even more than poor Susan, as it turns out. He ought to come home and face it with us. You ought to write to him by this mail, father; or I will, if you like."

"Wait a little, Dick," said the Squire. "I must

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think it out. Your mother and I must think it out together."

He was glad enough, a few days later, that Humphrey had not been written to by that mail. For there was a letter from him, from Australia. It was written from the Union Club in Sydney, and ran as follows:

My Dear Father,

I did not write to you by the last mail, because there was something I wanted to say, and was not quite ready. On the voyage out here I thought constantly of what had happened at home before Susan's death, and asked myself if there was anything I could do in the way of reparation. The money part of it we settled together before I left England; but I think there is something else that I ought to do. Supposing the story were to come out in some way, and I were out of England, it might be very awkward for you. Mrs. Amberley would be sure to hear of it, and she would be sure to come down on you. You might not feel inclined to tell the whole story, to clear yourself of any complicity in what I did, and it might be weeks or months before you could get at me.

So I have put down exactly what happened, in the form of an affidavit, which I am sending you under another cover. You can keep it by you, to use if the occasion should ever arise. I am not at all sure that if Mrs. Amberley ever comes back to England and makes any attempt to reinstate herself, it ought not

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to be sent to her; but I cannot bring myself to ask you to do that. I only say that if you think it ought to be done, I shall accept your decision. I should do again what I did to save Susan, and of course it would be great pain to me to have her name brought forward now; but she was so sincerely sorry for what she had done before she died, that I believe she would have been glad for me to take any steps to put the wrong right as far as possible. But, as I say, it is too hard to make up my mind to take what I suppose would be the only step that could really put everything right as far as we are concerned. You might tell mother and Dick about it now, and I will leave it in your hands.

I have made up my mind to stay out here for a year or two, and possibly for good. I like the country, and I like the people. I have made a good many friends already, especially here in Sydney. I am staying in this club, and it is like being amongst one's friends at home, except that everybody seems to have something to do. I have been up country, and I like that better still. In a month or so I am going on to a sheep station to learn the job, and if I find it suits me I shall ask you to help me buy one of my own. One gets a great deal of open-air life, and the work is interesting, and not too arduous. I mean that one could get down here, and to the other cities, and go home on a visit every few years. I shouldn't know what to do in England now, and I'm tired of doing nothing. Here I should have plenty to do, and could

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forget a good deal of the past, which has been so painful to all of us.

Give my love to mother, and all of them. I will write to her by the next mail.

Your affectionate son,

HUMPHREY.

The paper to which Humphrey had referred was in a long envelope among the Squire's other letters. He opened it, and read a plain, straightforward account of everything that had happened within Humphrey's knowledge.

"I went to my father on May 29th," part of it ran, "and asked him to pay this sum to Gotch. When he refused, I told him under a promise of secrecy of my wife's action, and told him that a concession to Gotch would have the indirect effect of keeping this from being known, and save himself and my family, as well as my wife, from the disgrace of an exposure. He told me that if that was the only way in which silence could be kept, matters must take their course, and refused to do anything. I then went to my sister-in-law, Mrs. Richard Clinton, and persuaded her to let Gotch have the money, which she did, knowing nothing of why I wanted it paid to him. . . .

"My father advised me to tell Lord Sedbergh of what had happened, or to allow him to tell him, and if possible to get him to accept the price of the necklace that had been stolen. . . .

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"Just before her death, my wife asked me to do what I could to put right the wrong that she had done, and I sign this account of what she told me, and of what happened afterwards within my knowledge, in the firm belief that she would have wished me to do it. . . ."

So there was the exoneration of the Squire, of everything that he had done, in his hands, to use as he pleased.

His thoughts were tender towards the son who had given him so much trouble, but now seemed to be in such a fair way of making up for the mistakes of his past life. As he sat and thought about him, it was not, at first, the relief that he had so honourably sent, little knowing how pat to the occasion it would come, that filled his thoughts, but the decision that Humphrey had come to with regard to his own future.

It seemed to the Squire an eminently right one. Humphrey was going on to the land, on which every man, according to his view, had the best chance of making the most of his life, and escaping the perils that beset the town-dweller. That it was in that great new country, where the land meant so much more even than it did in England, where there were still fields to conquer, still room in the great pastoral or agricultural armies, that Humphrey was going to make himself a place, was an added fitness. He would be entering on a new life in a new land. He was young yet. He would forget the past, but he would not forget the

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lessons he had learnt from it. He might even marry again; the Squire's vision broadened to embrace a new branch of the Clinton tree, to flourish in years to come on the fertile soil of that Britain overseas. Life on the land—it was the same in essence wherever it was lived, healthy, useful, and honourable. Thank God that Humphrey had embraced it! Thank God for one Clinton more to live it, in honour and well-being!

When he came to consider the document that Humphrey had put into his hands, he could not quite make up his mind what to do with it. He thought he would go down to the Dower House and consult Dick; but went to find his wife instead.

"I am glad that Humphrey has done this," she said, "very glad indeed. I think it is plain what use he thinks should be made of it, although he cannot bring himself to say so."

"You think that it ought to be sent to Mrs. Amberley?"

"I think that if that is done, and you write and tell him so, he will recognise that it was that feeling that directed him to write it. It will be full restitution. No need for us to balance her guilt and her punishment. She was wronged there, whether she was actually punished for it or not. Poor Susan's last cry to me was, 'If I could only do something to put it right before I die!' This will put it right, as far as any sin can be put right. It has been the one thing lacking. And it comes from Humphrey—from her, through Humphrey."

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"I will send a copy to her lawyers," said the Squire, "through mine. She will make what use she likes of it. We have to face her making a use of it that will hurt us. She may publish it in the papers. There would be nothing to prevent her."

Mrs. Clinton looked serious.

"Well, we'll risk that," said the Squire. "I think it would be a wicked thing to do; but she's a wicked woman. I haven't changed my mind about that, at any rate. We can only take the right course, and put up with the consequences."

"I think you would be justified," said Mrs. Clinton, "in saying, when you write to your lawyers, that she may use this document to clear herself, in any way she pleases, and that you will take no steps if she uses it privately; but that if she publishes it, you will publish the fact that she asked you for money, and her letter to Dick. I think she will not publish it. She can clear herself of so little. It is only as a weapon that she has been able to make use of her discovery. In spite of that letter of Lord Colne's, she must have used it to create the impression that she was innocent of everything. By publishing this, she will fasten on herself the guilt of what she was actually punished for, and remind the world of it. She would gain nothing; and if the fact of her having come to you for money is published as well, she will lose."

"My dear," said the Squire, "I think you have the clearest head of all of us. No, they won't let her use it in any way that can hurt us, for she will hurt

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herself as well. This is the end of it, thank God; and the talk will die down."

That afternoon the Squire sat in his room. Mrs. Clinton and Joan were driving. He had been out with a gun, with Dick, had come in and changed his boots, and was just beginning to nod, as he sat before the fire, with the "Times" on his knee.

The door was opened, and Lord Inverell was announced.

The young man, tall, fair, and open-faced, came forward with a smile. "Mr. Clinton," he said, as the door was shut behind him, "I hope you will give me a welcome. I have seen my uncle, and heard what he had to say. Now I have come to say what I want to say myself, and I hope you will listen to it."

The Squire was somewhat overcome. The memory of his interview with Lord Cheviot still rankled.

The young man took the seat to which he was motioned. He still smiled. He had a very frank and pleasing expression of face, and was handsome besides, with his crisp hair, that curled as much as it was permitted to, his grey eyes, and white, even teeth. "Mr. Clinton," he said, "I have come to ask you for Joan. Will you give her to me?"

The Squire experienced a strong and agreeable feeling of everything having come right all at once. It was so strong that it was almost too much for him. He hardly knew what he was saying as he stammered: "You want my little Joan? She's the last one I have left."

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"I know. I should have taken her from you before. But I waited, after Mrs. Clinton's letter. I wish I hadn't. But I didn't know for some time why it had been written. When I did know, I waited a little longer; and then my uncle heard—what I wanted, you know—and talked to me. He has a way with him—my uncle, Mr. Clinton. When he says a thing, you are inclined to give in to him—at first."

His smile was inviting here. "He told you to wait a little longer, I suppose," said the Squire.

"Yes, that was it. He kept me hanging on. There couldn't be any hurry, he said. Then he seems to have written letters. He is rather fond of writing letters; they'll go into his biography by and by, you know. But not the one he wrote to Colne. *I* didn't ask him to write that. I wish he hadn't."

"The answer he got was a very awkward one for me," said the Squire. "I couldn't deal with it at the time to Lord Cheviot's satisfaction. Fortunately, I can now."

"I'm glad of that, Mr. Clinton. But it's not necessary, as far as I am concerned, you know. Still, I shouldn't object to your squaring my uncle, if you can, without putting yourself out. I don't want to quarrel with him, if it can be helped."

"Why have you come here, after what he told you?"

"Because I made him tell me everything. Rather a triumph for me, that! He told me that you had said you had been through a horrible time, and hadn't done anything that you were sorry for. I said, 'Thanks,

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uncle, that's good enough for me. There are a lot of stories going about, and you can believe which of them you like. I choose to believe the one that Joan's father tells, and I'm off there this afternoon. Wish me luck!'"

"He let you come, without any further discussion?"

"Oh no; not a bit. That was three or four days ago. He argued with me. I said, 'Well, what do you want me to do?' He said, 'Find out what truth there is in this story, before you go any further. There's *some* truth in it.' Then a bright idea struck me. I said, 'Old Sedbergh ought to know something about it. Will it satisfy you if I go to him?'"

"Ah! I never thought of that. Did it satisfy him?"

"He had to say that it would. So I went. I couldn't get hold of the old man till this morning. But when I did, he looked at me in a funny, kind sort of way, and said, 'If you can get Joan Clinton for your wife, you'll be the luckiest young man in the world. Go and get her. There's no reason why you shouldn't. I know what I'm saying.' Well, that put the lid on, Mr. Clinton. I sent a note to my uncle; I'd promised to do that before I came; and here I am."

The Squire breathed a deep sigh of relief. "You have come at the right time," he said, "and I am very glad you have come as you have—knowing nothing more than you do. It's a thing that I shall think of with pleasure all my life. But, as I told your uncle, I wouldn't ask you here as long as my name was under

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a cloud. Perhaps the name of Clinton will be under a cloud some little time longer. But, thank God, the cloud no longer rests on this house. I can tell you everything that has happened, feeling that I am wronging nobody. I couldn't have told Lord Cheviot, and I couldn't have told *you* yesterday. Read this. It is a paper I received from my son, Humphrey, from Australia, this morning."

"I'm satisfied for myself," he said. "Can I tell my uncle what's in it?"

"You can tell anyone you like," said the Squire.

As he was reading it, the door opened and Joan came in, in her furs. It was beginning to get dusk. When she saw that there was somebody with her father, she would have withdrawn. When she saw who it was, her hand went to her heart; but her lover turned and saw her at that moment.

A little later he confessed, with a happy laugh, that he had brought down a bag, and left it at the station. The Squire went out of the room to procure somebody to fetch it, which he could very well have done by ringing the bell.

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CHAPTER IX

SKIES CLEAR

We began with the train, and will end with the train. It was the material link by which Kencote, standing as it had done through so many centuries remote and aside from the turmoil of life, had been drawn into the centre of troublous events. It had brought Joan home from her fateful visit to Brummels, Humphrey to tell his terrible story, Susan to her sad resting-place, Mrs. Amberley to demand satisfaction and threaten vengeance, and latterly the young lover whose coming had brought joy in place of sorrow.

Now it was to bring, within a few days, enough guests to fill all the spare rooms of Kencote for Joan's wedding; and it was bringing, this afternoon, one of the most valued of them all.

This was Miss Bird, affectionately known to the Clinton family as "the old starling," who had first taught Dick his letters nearly forty years before, and had gone on teaching letters, and other things, to all the young Clintons in turn, until the twins had reached the ripe age of fifteen, six years before. Then she had left, much regretted, partly because the twins had to be "finished," and she could not undertake suitably to finish them, partly because duty had called her from

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the spacious comforts of Kencote to share the narrow home of a widowed sister.

The twins were at the station to meet her—tall, beautiful, stately young women to the outward eye, but, for this occasion, children again at heart, and mischievous children at that.

"Oh, what fun it is!" said Nancy, with a shiver of pleasure, as the train came into the station. "I don't feel a day older than fourteen. There she is, Joan—the sweet old lamb!"

It must be confessed that the years had robbed Miss Bird of such sweetness as she may at one time have presented to the impartial view. She was a diminutive, somewhat withered, elderly woman, but still sprightly in speech and movement, and of breathless volubility.

She flung herself out of the carriage, almost before it had come to a standstill, and was enveloped in a warm, not to say undignified embrace by both the twins at once.

"Oh, my darlings," she cried, flinging to the winds all the stops in the language, "to see you both standing there just as it used to be though one married and the other going to be and such a *grand* marriage too as sweet as ever my bonnet Nancy darling and everything the same here but a new station-master I see oh it is *too* much."

Joan and Nancy marched her out of the station to the carriage, all three laughing and talking at once, and made her sit between them, which was just possible, as she took up very little room.

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She wiped away an unaffected tear, and broke out again.

"This is one of the happiest days of my life and to think of *me* being an honoured guest and amongst all the lords and ladies I hope I shall know how to behave myself and one of the first you wrote to darling Joan as you said and Mr. Clinton saying whoever else was left out *I* must be asked and how is dear Mrs. Clinton well I hope I'm sure the kindness I have received in this house I never can forget and never shall forget darling Nancy my bonnet."

"Isn't she too sweet for words, Joan?" said Nancy. "She hasn't altered a bit. Starling darling, you are the most priceless treasure. We didn't value you nearly enough when we had you with us."

"Now my pet that is not a thing to say," said Miss Bird, "two dearer and more affectionate children you might roam the world over and never find troublesome sometimes I do not say you were not but never really naughty no one could say it and now grown up quite and one a married woman it doesn't seem possible."

"I was very hurt that you didn't come to my wedding," said Nancy. "I know why it is. Joan is going to be a Countess, and I am only plain Mrs."

"The idea of such a thing," said Miss Bird in horror, "never so much as entered my head how can you say it Nancy I'm sure if Joan had been going to marry a crossing-sweeper not that I don't think she would adorn *any* position and much more suitable as it is I should have come *just* the same and you know quite well

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why I couldn't come to your wedding Nancy and almost cried my eyes out but an infectious illness you would *not* have liked to be brought you should not say such things."

"I'll forgive you," said Nancy, "if you promise to love John. He is here, you know. But we wouldn't let anybody come to the station with us. We wanted you to ourselves."

"Pets!" said Miss Bird affectionately.

"Ronald is here too, but I wouldn't let him come either," said Joan.

"What is he like tell me about him," said Miss Bird.

Joan cast a quick glance at Nancy, over the rather disordered bonnet. It was the look that had meant in their childhood, "Let's have her on."

"He is most awfully *good*," she said in rather an apologetic voice. "Starling dear, I wanted to say something to you before you saw him. You don't think—if you love anybody very much, and they are really good—it matters about their looks, do you?"

"Oh, but I consider him *most* handsome," said Miss Bird, "my sister gave me that illustrated paper with his photograph and yours in a full page to each I wrote and told you so and pleased and proud I was to have it and over my mantelpiece it is hanging now."

"Yes, I know you wrote, darling, and it was very sweet of you. I couldn't bring myself to answer your letter. You know papers *will* make mistakes sometimes."

"What do you mean what mistake?" asked Miss

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Bird. "It said plainly beneath the photographs 'The Earl of Inverell' and 'Miss Joan Clinton.'"

"Yes, I know it did, and it was me all right. Oh, Starling darling, can't you guess? Ronald is very good and very sweet, and I love him dearly; but——"

"But he is no beauty," said Nancy. "You can't expect us both to marry handsome men."

"I shouldn't call him *scrubby*, exactly, should you, Nancy?" enquired Joan.

"Not to his face," replied Nancy.

Joan gave a little gurgle, which she turned into a cough. "Starling darling, you don't mind beards in a young man, do you?" she asked.

"Oh, you will get him to shave that off," said Nancy, "after you are married. I shouldn't worry about that. And I don't think a *very* slight squint really matters. You can always call it a cast in the eye, and some people like it."

"You see, Starling darling, I wanted you to be prepared," said Joan. "I couldn't let you see him without saying something first, when you thought he was that good-looking young man in the picture. He is much better, really, and his looks don't put *me* off in the least. I don't think about them. But if I hadn't told you, you might have been so surprised that you would have said something that would have hurt his feelings."

"As if I should or could," exclaimed Miss Bird indignantly, "there was no occasion to say a single word Joan and a good kind heart is *far* better than

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good looks as I have often told you you do me a great injustice."

"I knew she wouldn't really mind, Nancy," said Joan. "But I am glad to have warned her. She will get used to the beard."

"And the cast in the eye," added Nancy.

"Indeed," said Miss Bird, "I should never notice such things a beard is a sign of manly vigour your father has a beard."

"Ah, but it isn't a beard like father's," said Joan. "It is more tufty and fluffy. I suppose you thought that young man in the picture *very* handsome, didn't you, Starling darling?"

"Indeed no such thing," said Miss Bird, "I said to my sister and she will bear witness good-looking yes but *not* a match in looks for my darling Joan and glad I am now that I said it."

Joan burst into a laugh, and embraced her warmly. "Oh, you're too sweet and precious for words," she said. "That *was* Ronald, and I shall tell him you don't think he is very handsome."

"What a donkey you are, Joan!" said Nancy. "Why didn't you let her meet him in the hall?"

"Now that is *too* bad Joan 'n' Nancy," said Miss Bird, quite in her old style of reproof, "a little piece of fun I can understand but you might have made it *most* awkward for me Joan my bonnet well there I suppose I must say nothing more you *will* have your joke and neither of you have altered at all you are very naughty girls and I was just going to say if you did not behave

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I should tell Mrs. Clinton pets I love you more than ever."

Miss Bird was almost overcome with emotion when she arrived at the house. The story was immediately told against her, and provoked laughter, especially from the Squire, who said, "The young monkeys! They want husbands to keep them in order, both of them. 'Pon my word, with you here, Miss Bird, I feel inclined to pack them off to the schoolroom, to get them out of the way. It makes me feel young again to see you here, Miss Bird. You seem to belong to Kencote, and I'm very pleased to see you here again, very pleased indeed."

Miss Bird's heart was full, as she was taken up to her old bedroom by Joan and Nancy. Such a welcome! And from the Squire too, of whom she had always stood much in awe, but to whom she looked up as the type and perfection of manhood!

But how he had aged! When she was left alone, she looked out on to the spring green of the park, and the daffodils growing under the trees, and thought of how many years it was since she had first looked out on to that familiar scene, and how unchanged it was, although the children she had taught, and loved, had all grown up, and most of them were married. She thought of herself as a young, timid girl, for the first time away from her home, and of the Squire as a splendid young man, bluff and hearty even then. She had spent the best part of her life at Kencote, and had slept more nights in this room than in any other. Kencote

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had been her home, and she had grown old in it. If the Squire, who had always been so vigorous that the years had passed over him imperceptibly, was also at last growing old, it was in the place he loved above all others. She liked to think of him and dear Mrs. Clinton still living here, she hoped for many years to come, with nothing changed about them, but only an added peace and quietness, to suit the evening of their lives.

Later in the evening, before dinner, the Squire paid a long-deferred visit to his cellars. The house would soon be filled from top to bottom with guests, and he wished to put the best he had before them, or before such of them as could appreciate it; also to take stock generally of the supply of wines in ordinary use, which he did regularly, but had not done for many months past. He was accompanied by his old butler with the cellar-book, and a footman with a candle, and spent nearly an hour among the bins and cobwebs.

At the end of the inspection, some slight trouble arose. The old butler had been fetching up claret which the Squire had intended should be kept for a time. He did not drink claret himself, and had not noticed the change.

"If we had used the other lot up you ought to have come and told me, Porter," he said. "I never meant this wine to be used every day. You come down here without a with-your-leave or a by-your-leave, and act as if you were master. You've been with me for a number of years, and have come to think you can

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do what you like. But you can't. I won't have it, Porter."

He marched off between the bins, and up the cellar steps. The old butler looked after him with a smile on his face, of which the attendant footman mistook the source, remarking, "He do give it you, don't he?"

"They're the best words I've had from him for a long time," said the old man. "He's got back to himself again."

But if the Squire had got back to himself, it was not entirely to his old habits. It had never before been Mrs. Clinton's custom to sit with him in his room, as he now liked her to do, and as she did that evening, while the younger members of the party, including Miss Bird, were disporting themselves in the billiard-room.

"This will be the last of it, Nina," he was saying. "When Frank marries it won't be from this house. They call it a quiet wedding, but, 'pon my word, I don't know how we could very well have found room for any more than are coming. I'm rather dreading it in a way, Nina. I feel I'm getting too old for all this bustle."

"We shall be very quiet when it is all over," said Mrs. Clinton.

"Yes, my dear," he said. "You and I will be quiet together for the rest of our lives. We shall have our children with us often, and our grandchildren; but for the most of the time we shall just be by ourselves.

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We've had a long life together, my dear. We've had a great deal of happiness in it, and have been through some very deep trouble. But the skies are clear now, and, please God, they'll keep clear. Nina, my dear, we've got a great deal to thank Him for."

THE END

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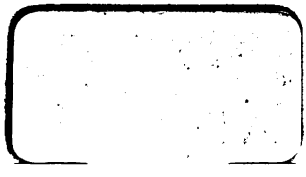
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